

# **RE-THINKING ASSESSMENT PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE**

## **PEER- AND SELF-ASSESSMENT**

**VOLUME ONE OF TWO**

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which was nothing short of miraculous at times*

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## ***ABSTRACT***

Many succeed academically through traditional assessment, but all students are disadvantaged by the one-size-fits-all, mechanistic approach which gives little consideration to the *relational* side of learning. This demands correction through a holistic philosophy of learning, where the learning environment caters for personal and social as well as academic development.

More insidiously, traditional summative assessment obstructs the development of self-reliance, inculcating an over-reliance on ‘authority’ (teachers, examiners). New skillsets are needed by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, self-directed, lifelong learner. Teacher-directed assessment must defer to collaborative, interdependent, empowering, partnership based assessment, to maximise knowledge, work and life outcomes, benefiting individual and society.

This study was conducted with a random selection of classes, including primary and secondary schools, early school leavers, senior learners and tertiary students. It shows that, when applied with care, peer- and self-assessment can serve as a summative and formative assessment tool, bringing additional benefits including self-reliance, critical thinking, decision-making, reasoned judgement and improved inter- and intrapersonal relationships. Identified as life-enabling competences, these are areas difficult to teach and not yet assessed, but critical to today’s society.

This thesis calls for a paradigm shift in assessment thinking to bring about more innovative, holistic forms of assessment practice, which can support the learner’s sense of *self* and provide for sustainable lifelong learning. Peer- and self-assessment is shown to satisfy these criteria.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

*Repeated responses to recurrent stimuli may fix a habit of acting in a certain way. All of us have many habits of whose import we are quite unaware, since they are formed without our knowing what we were about. Consequently they possess us, rather than we them. They move us; they control us. Unless we become aware of what they accomplish, and pass judgment upon the worth of the result, we do not control them.*

Dewey, 1916: 29

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

At a basic level, research is a mechanism serving the common good of both community and individual. Through such educational research our values, in the form of attitudes, beliefs, behaviour, practice and policies can be held up to scrutiny. This offers the opportunity to enhance the provision of an educational environment that nurtures all from the most senior learner to the youngest child throughout her/his lifelong education. This type of enquiry provides a chance to analyse the *consequence of habitual practice*, lest we forget that habitual *educational* practice, with its feedback into greater society, is an immense force with the ability to mould countless lives.

This chapter outlines the background to this research, which investigates one such habit that needs rethinking: the philosophy and practice of assessment. This thesis is a reconsideration of the tradition of entrusting a higher authority, the teacher or examiner, with sole responsibility for assessment with the consequences of this for learners. The dissertation documents a two-phase study which resulted from a trial in which the traditional form of assessment was replaced by a standardised form of peer- and self-assessment (P&SA).

The original intention of the research was to provide learners with more input into the assessment of their team-based activities. This would give more congruence between the learner-centric teaching methods and the prevailing teacher-centric assessment methodologies. As with any learning methodology, assessment has the potential to impact positively or negatively on a wide range of learner behaviour. As the study progressed, the investigation included such impact, looking at behaviours which are self-directed and independent or deferent and dependent.

### *1.1.1 DISSERTATION STRUCTURE*

The chapters in this dissertation are arranged in the order described below.

The current chapter explores the background to this research and describes the context and rationale for this investigation. It describes the structure of the research which was carried out in two phases. The following sections examine the ethics and boundaries.

Chapter 2 discusses P&SA in the literature, comparing and contrasting this with traditional assessment. It looks at assessment and its implications from the perspective of the learner and the end user.

Explained in Chapter 3 are the conceptual structures of the research methodology. The actual methods employed and the instruments used to collect the data are then linked to this conceptual framework.

Chapter 4 provides the findings from Phase One, which comprises the motivation survey results from the participant undergraduate students in the years, 2006/07 and 2007/08.

Chapter 5 describes the results of interviews with teachers and co-ordinators during Phase Two of the research study.

Reported in Chapter 6 are the findings from interviews with learners in Phase Two of the research together with the data from surveys on self-reliance and self-directed learning.

Chapter 7 analyses and discusses the results of the findings described in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

The final chapter provides recommendations stemming from this research and draws the final conclusion.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND**

### *1.2.1 CONCEPT OF DEPENDENCY*

Writing about urgent calls for legislation in the areas of childcare and early education, Donnelly (1999: 9) coincidentally provides the fundamental rationale for fostering self-directive skills and attitudes. In an oblique reference, not intended to focus on P&SA, she argues ‘you can’t hand a child a made world. They have to make it their own. Understanding comes from within’. This is the essence of common sense as applied to education. However, the cultivation of skills of self-direction and a self-determining attitude in a world where, from childhood, the price of educational and life membership is fitting in, is by no means a trivial challenge.

Learning to fit in from a young age can be viewed as a necessary obligation in education and society. On the one hand, it is a force which offers stability; it helps maintain social order and allows both society and individuals to progress through shared

knowledge and experience. On the other hand, this same force holds the power to mesmerize its willing captives. By fitting in we are provided with an ‘umbrella’ to shelter under. Relying on the safety-in-numbers factor produces in many people the impression of security, reassurance and protection. These conditions form the ideal breeding ground for developing habits of dependency and unconscious conformity. For many individuals, leaving this safe harbour can provoke unsavoury feelings of isolation, making them reluctant to take the lead or to stray from the mainstream. For the young learner who stands susceptible to these influences, this is the beginning of a lifetime where learning *and many other areas of life which are affected by our early educational experiences* are overshadowed by habits of obedience and relying on ‘authority’ to take charge. Aronson *et al* (2005:272) while arguing the value of obedience in keeping social order, make the point that ‘obedience can have extremely serious and even tragic consequences. People will obey the orders of an authority figure to hurt or even kill other human beings’.

‘Credentialed authority’ and the ‘primacy of experts’ are terms drawn on by psychologist Bassman (2007: 3, 191) to highlight the piquancy of the sharp divisions between those wielding the power of authority and those subject to that authority. He speaks of suffering negative influences at the hands of one teacher when he was ten years old causing him to grapple with lasting frustration and resentment as his voice was ignored. He later describes how his harrowing experiences and thought provoking observations, emanating from ‘both sides of the locked door’ (first as a patient, voluntarily admitted but finding himself devoid of rights, and subsequently as a qualified psychologist), further shaped his views on self, identity and the pursuit of self-determining behaviour. Whilst applied to psychological well-being, his arguments on the need for personal liberty transcend disciplinary boundaries to include the field of

education; liberty equates to freedom to choose one's own path, to be responsible, empowered and self-determining.

Bassman is not alone in recognising the peril of placing unquestioning trust in 'credentialed authority'. The evidence is clearly profiled in Ireland's current tempestuous politico-economic state, in the fall-out from institutional abuse of power in at least the political, financial and clerical domains. This unsettling development of a dependency mentality is reflected in the writing of contemporary social commentators. McWilliams (2010) explores Ireland's prevailing political and financial debacle and questions if the Irish have grown from being a defiant people to developing a culture of complacency. He speculates that

. . . the Irish weakness for not causing any trouble . . . has led us to a situation where we are embarrassed to admit that we messed up. We don't want to stand out. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves for serious reasons.

The growing dependent nature of Irish society is also depicted by Hunt (2010) as she claims some people:

. . . demand multiple rights – to a home, to a financial income, to a myriad of state services – but are unwilling to accept that they also have a responsibility to contribute to that society if it is going to work.

The bottom line is: there is only so much money to go around and if we all take from the system without contributing it's bound to collapse. This culture of demanding dependency can be seen everywhere, from the way parents refuse to take responsibility for their children to the extraordinary mindset of privilege and rights shown by certain sectors of the public service.

It is inarguable that educational practice can be used to communicate and instil values and is a recognised medium for bringing about change. Exploring Irish history, Raftery (2009: 19) speaks of how a child's reading material and schooling is argued by many scholars as having 'facilitated the British cultural assimilation policy for 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland'. In the same manner, the danger of promoting, *en masse*, a proclivity for the subjugation of self to 'credentialed authority' represents a significant risk to society.

Expounding on this risk of how seeds of a dependent mentality can be sown in a subtle and unintentional fashion, Barrington (1975: 9) asserts the role of government is ‘to serve the common good’; he carries on to point out that a challenge inherent in governing is ‘where the apathetic ordinary citizen feels no need to be responsible, or to worry, because the [people] in government will know, and do, best’. As a counterpoint, he clings to the aspiration that society will travel beyond this phase to a more mature level; he holds the expectation that through education the citizen would become more self-realised with the capacity to act significantly in the political arena.

While not specifically addressing social, political or citizenship education, it is to the same end that this study seeks to investigate the empowerment of the learner as an able citizen, capable of independent, critical analytical thought and behaviour which can be channelled in the service of self and community. As society’s needs may be sated through satisfying the needs of the many individuals, the challenge is to facilitate learners in developing their sense of self-reliance and their awareness of *self* as an agent in creating and shaping progress.

This dissertation hypothesises that the practice of P&SA, as a learning strand, can be composed of personal and professional elements which can be developed to help meet this challenge. It does not propose P&SA as a cure-all or a quick fix for combating dependent thinking and behaviour, nor does it suggest P&SA as the single route to improving a learner’s sense of self-direction. What it aims to do is to examine whether, as a learning tool, assessment could leave the learner with a healthier sense of self, a stronger sense of self-worth, improved personal objectivity and more *confidence-in-self* to adopt self-directed ways of thinking and behaving. This may sound simple, but for the reasons already mentioned and the complexities outlined below and in Chapter 2, improving an individual’s sense of self-reliance and self-direction in any context is no



mean achievement. Being skilled as a self-reliant learner or individual suggests an inherent capacity to self-direct. However, the facilitation and exercise of self-direction, in learning or elsewhere, is not straightforward, a point made by Candy (1991: 200) who claims ‘self-directed learning rarely exists in its “pure” form, and, like personal autonomy, is nearly always a “matter of degree”’. Today, implicit and explicit assessment practice, taking the form of teacher-led assessment, may be implicated in perpetuating a learned resistance to the development of a self-reliant mindset. Boud and Falchikov (2006: 402) help identify the source of assessment’s power to imbue learners with a predisposition to dependency with their observation:

. . . while it is not a defining feature of summative or formative assessment, students have been the subjects of assessment: they are required to undertake tests, they are given feedback on matters that teachers judge important. They are recipients of the actions of others, not active agents in the assessment process.

Paradoxically, learner-centric teaching methodologies are availed of in order to promote self-directed learning while conventional assessment methodologies simultaneously appear to require acquiescence. This is the dependency *versus* self-direction paradox in education which will be discussed throughout this work.

### *1.2.2 THEORY OF SELF AND SOCIETAL CHANGE*

Notwithstanding the paradox, self-direction, with its facets of self-determination and self-regulation, has been and continues to be hailed as a primary source of positive disposition, indispensable to progress and human survival. However, investing in the pursuit of self-direction in learning (or in any other context) is not to be confused with the preoccupation with self. The fulfilment of own aims will ultimately fall on barren ground unless such pursuits feed into the wider context to serve the common good of society. Seligman (2006: 284), describing the move from ‘the public [society] good to

private [individual] goods', denounces such preoccupation as the growth of personal isolation and individualistic *modi operandi*, arguing that a society that perpetuates an inflated sense of the individual will leave those individuals prey to depression. He observes that with the development of consumerism in society came greater freedom and choice for the individual. This has been paralleled by a weakening of commitment to the greater common good of all, which has resulted in a fragmented society, lacking the capacity to support itself or sustain and support the individual. This leaves individuals, through a shared preoccupation with own goals, lacking collaboration and collective mutual support. Thus, the individual suffers feelings of isolation and helplessness which, if left unabated, can produce a sense of hopelessness ['learned helplessness'], culminating in depression and a loss of belief in self (Seligman, 1975, 2006).

The ultimate aim of learning is to develop human potential to best serve and progress the mutually dependent needs of the individual and of society as a whole. To understand the relationship between self-direction, the self and P&SA, it is necessary to consider psychologies underlying both the behaviour and thought processes of the stakeholders: learners, teachers and those individuals involved in the formulation of educational policy. In general, most psychologies are based on investigations of *how* people develop, learn, think, understand and generally function. The different schools usually stem from a study of one or more of this type of field. For example, Piaget (1950; 1953), Vygotsky (1934; 1978), Kohlberg (see Kurtines and Greif, 1974) studied human development. Watson (1914) and Skinner (1974) looked at behaviour. Wertheimer and the Gestalt school (see Murchison, 1927) studied how people understand (develop their schemata) by grouping *objects* by recognition of some pattern against a more general *background*. Bloom *et al* (1956; 1964) analysed learning into a

taxonomy – different domains, through each of which learning progressed to different levels. There are theories which attempt to explain the *way* in which learning proceeds (Gagné, 1964; 1973; Kolb, 1984), or the *drive* to learn (Thorndike, 1932; Hull, 1943).

### 1.2.3 *THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT OF SELF WITHIN SOCIETY*

In what may be termed a meta-psychology, or broader philosophy, is the study of *why* any of this is important – the ‘meaning of life’. This is tackled by theorists such as Fromm (1942) and Seligman (2006), who look at the larger picture – not just how we understand things, but *why* we understand, or find the need to understand them: the broader context, the overarching purpose of life and existence. Gödel (1962) asserts through his mathematical theorem that there is a limit to which we can logically analyse the self within the universe. His theorem states that no system can show the reason for its own existence from within the system itself. However, even within this limitation Fromm (1942) hypothesises certain logical deductions. With the assumption that there *is* a bigger picture, and that the striving toward betterment of society is necessary, he explores the relationship between the individual and society. The individual is usually assumed to be working toward the betterment of her/his own self, self-actualisation (Rogers, 1963; Maslow, 1954), in whatever way that term might be understood. Fromm analyses this assumption, pointing out that the view that an individual has free will and can act independently includes the assumption of a world view of understanding *self* as a unique, sole inhabitant of the *self's* schema. He argues this to be a fearsome and formidable reality which most individuals avoid dwelling upon, preferring to envisage themselves as a unit within a whole [society]. Thus, most individuals automatically begin from a position of subjugating free will to the perceived wishes of society at large.

Fromm's theorising is relevant to this study as it situates the *self* in society, highlighting the constant tension between the perceived self as a free, independently thinking individual and the perceived self as a bound member of a regimented society. His theory is scarcely needed to understand that there is a tension, and that the point of balance can shift this way or that depending on the current structure of society and the understanding of the individual (whose perspective, being limited as existing within that society, is also bounded by Gödel's theorem) of society's structure.

#### 1.2.4 *THEORY OF A BALANCED SOCIETY*

This philosophy, with a general model of damping the swing of society from one extreme (subsuming the individual to the needs of society) to the other (belief in only the individual, with no higher purpose) calls for a balance, where the individual has a freedom (maximised, but within limits) to develop the self, with a commitment (generalised, but with a minimum expectation) to 'give back' to society. Currently society seems to be swinging between the two extremes, and it is only a balanced approach to education, facilitating learning and personal development [holistic education], that will allow individuals to develop in a balanced way, maximising their own and society's use of available resources. Individuals this way can develop self-reliant, self-directed, interdependent *selves* who will serve to actually advance the whole of society.

What all this is pointing to, including Seligman's conclusion, is that individuals seek to distract themselves by attaching to a greater purpose than themselves to gain release from their sense of being a solitary entity. Solace is not to be found in the sole pursuit of own goals, a fact which only serves to exacerbate the knowledge that the lone individual, by *fusing with the masses*, absents her/his influence. Accepting that there

will always be the *leaders* in society who can take an independent stance and use it to improve the lot of self and others, many individuals become part of the *herd*. A sense that one matters as a person or that one can make an appreciable difference to *life* is difficult for the average individual to comprehend, particularly as the senses are dulled through media massaging, marketing ploys and other such modern cant. However, it is useful to perceive the inherent *fear* [that each individual is *alone* in their universe] which must be overcome by any individual wishing to look into her/his individuality to a level which allows one an understanding of how the *self* fits into and operates within society. Such a depth of understanding, and confrontation of the fear of standing alone, is necessary to develop the self and to adapt to being an autonomous individual, relinquishing both the security of total conformity to, and the reassurance provided by subjugating oneself to, society. It is not unreasonable to posit that all learning can temper or compound this innate anxiety by either increasing or weakening the learner's *confidence-in-self*. Assessment as a learning methodology can be either the traditional, teacher-led style where the learner is passive, weakening *confidence-in-self*, or a more innovative, student-teacher partnership approach, which can stimulate *confidence-in-self*. This understanding informs and impacts all development of the self and as such forms the backbone of this work. Moreover, there is a corollary of increasing personal potential, bolstering individual capacity to take responsibility and acknowledge accountability for one's actions.

Table 1.1 outlines the central tenets of Fromm's (1942) and Seligman's (2006) respective Individuation and Individualism concepts, and although the latter writes from an American perspective, it can be generalised to include any society at a similar stage of development and sits well within an Irish context.

**Table 1.1:** Development of the individual – individuation and individualism

<b>Fromm – individuation</b> <i>(growth of individual: independently thinking, acting)</i>	<b>Seligman – individualism</b> <i>(commitment exclusively to self)</i>
<p>❖ <b>individuation</b> – natural development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ driven by innate need to grow</li> <li>○ opposed by fear (of <i>peering into the abyss</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ primary link (to mother/close family) – formed before self-awareness develops</li> <li>▪ secondary link – formed to replace primary link (lost in developing awareness)</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ operates by society imposing requirements on individual – often by subterfuge – replacing <i>self</i> by <i>pseudo-self</i> where individual believes there is free choice, but the fear of loss of society's support is manipulated to allow the individual to believe the only choice is that which society requires for its own ends <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ loss of actual control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- can lead to depression, coping mechanisms such as masochistic, over-submissive tendencies or, in some cases, neuroticism leading to a sadistic need to dominate and control others</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ loss of power <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- fear of responsibility</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ loss of self <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- loss of critical thinking ability</li> <li>- loss of ability to think <i>for</i> self</li> <li>- conformity to the point of automatization, where <i>self</i> is subsumed into the predominant culture</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>❖ <b>need for support structure:</b> 'commons' – belief in a purpose transcendent of self, for example family, tribe, nation, or religion [<i>c.f.</i> Fromm's fear of 'aloneness' of true independence]</p> <p>❖ <b>support structure declining</b> with societal structure as commons eroding due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ decrease of family size and stability</li> <li>○ ease of travel, increasing physical separation of family, friends and acquaintances</li> <li>○ decline of patriotism (in USA) with public openness of political scandal, perceived empire building [could be explored with a background of the earlier loss of faith in 'first world' nations and 'third world' nations striving to instil a sense of national belief and pride in their populaces]</li> <li>○ increase in educational levels encouraging more exploration of beliefs, lessening faith in dogmatic religions</li> </ul> <p>❖ offset by <b>increase in individualism</b>, belief in self</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ supported by increased consumerism, choice: gives appearance of independence whilst attempting to limit actual freedom to that which suits larger society (economy)</li> </ul> <p>❖ causes feelings of helplessness when supporting commons declines too far – resulting in feelings of hopelessness, despair and depression</p>

Source: Researcher, summarised from Fromm (1942) and Seligman (2006)

These theories affect all aspects of life, whether personal or public, political or educational. There are parallels which may be drawn from almost any aspect of life involving the individual and the relationship with the wider community, which changes with the stage of development of civilization, and the whole of society. An example of some of the possible parallels are shown in Table 1.2 (below), together with the appropriate perceptions of self, which develop as the child matures and becomes fully self-aware.

**Table 1.2:** Parallel development of society, organisation, education and the individual

<b>Stage:</b>	Primitive	Developing	Current	Future
<b><i>Politics</i></b>	Familial/feudal	Dictatorial/rule by elite	'Democracy' – rule by majority	Consensus?
<b><i>Education</i></b>	Familial/tribal	Rigid (by social class): masses to serve society	Appear learner-centred: controlled by assessment	Learner-centric learning and assessment
<b><i>Learning</i></b>	As needed (society's needs)	Rote – subservient to society; job targeted	Society controlled curricula – appear independent; career targeted	Self-directed interdependent; personal development targeted
<b><i>Self</i></b>	Subservient (needed for society's survival – close society supports individual)	Subservient to ruling elite – organised support by society at large	Pseudo-self free to choose – good support by society at large, waning as individualism increases	Self-reliant individuals contribute to and benefit from society as needed, interdependently

Source: Researcher and in part adapted from Fromm (1942) and Seligman (2006)

### *1.2.5 CONCEPT OF EDUCATING THE INTERDEPENDENT SELF FOR A BALANCED SOCIETY*

Self-awareness is the key to developing self-direction, and self-direction comes as a step on the road to self-reliance. However, self-reliance itself has also to be regarded as a step on the road to true self-direction in learning. On initially encountering education, the young student comes to learn how to reflect, to discern where personal interests lie, to set a goal and, gradually, how to find the path to the goal. If followed to the ultimate, and if accompanied by a concomitant advance in self-confidence, this path can bring about self-reliance in learning. However, self-reliance denotes independence, which by itself remains incomplete. The full extent of potential learning will not be realised, despite the full use of the learner's own resources: learning can truly begin as an independent learner, but not until exchange of resources with others [interdependence] can enlightenment occur. The truly self-directed individual appreciates that most learning comes from others. For example, those who have the new knowledge, those whose vision can illuminate the new path, those within whom lays the empathy to translate one's knowledge into a substantial entity that can help others. This is the pinnacle of learning, the realisation that potential knowledge and skills are infinite, and

it is only in collaboration we can maximise our use of it, interdependently, as self-directed but not self-contained learners.

The starting position of this study seeks to empower the individual. It combines and documents the voice of the service-users [learners], the voice of the service providers [teachers, co-ordinators] together with other related voices of persons and institutions which inform the educational assessment debate. As the research study proposes to serve and sustain the *self* in lifelong learning, the learner voices are representative of the learning lifespan. The voices include, in no particular order, elementary pupils [about 9 to 10 years], early school leavers [about 15+ years], third-level students [about 18 to 20 years and mature older students 23 to 50+ years], senior learners [about 40 to 70+ years] and second-level students [about 16 years].

Put succinctly, the scope of this work is to:

- ❑ Establish that it is not possible to become self-directed through a dependency route, which is the way of traditional assessment
- ❑ Illustrate that skills promoting self-sufficiency and interdependent attitudes can be fostered by encouraging learners to adopt a more responsible, leadership role in assessing peer and own learning, progress and performance
- ❑ Establish why educating for self-directed individuals calls for a commitment to models of assessment (together with other learning methodologies) which in themselves nurture a learner's sense of self-direction
- ❑ Demonstrate how one such model of assessment, P&SA, can sustain the lifelong learner uninterrupted across the lifespan
- ❑ Argue, in suggesting the need for learner/teacher partnerships, that this assessment model rights the present equity imbalance prevalent in traditional



assessment, a point which is reasoned to be more in line with the principles of educational democracy

- Finally, to assert that accepted forms of assessment need to be brought more into line with having as their purpose the aim of ensuring that, within a holistic framework, the individual learns to speak and think for her/himself from the outset, continuing uninterrupted throughout her/his lifelong education [cradle to grave]

Thus, a case is made for a paradigm shift in assessment thinking.

### **1.3 RESEARCH CONTEXT AND RATIONALE**

Experiencing something for oneself tends to heighten its impression. It rouses the senses and sharpens the mind to the merits and shortcomings of the event. Living such an event, but experiencing it from different standpoints compounds the understanding and knowledge, as each succeeding perspective adds its respective value to the preceding experience. For example, a student is practiced in the experience of assessment, having had work assessed by the teacher/assessor, and holds that particular perspective. If the student then graduates and assumes the role of teacher/assessor, this adds a further perspective. The outlook may change yet again if the same teacher/assessor pursues professional development; being again in the role of student, albeit at a different level, adds the perspective of experiencing traditional assessment with learning being assessed by another teacher/examiner. These additional occurrences do not simply add to the experience: the synergy of the differing view points gives additional depth to the understanding of the experience, and the ability to empathise with others in a similar situation. Mirroring Bassman's phraseology above, it was such experience of traditional assessment in higher education from both sides of the teacher's desk, which informed the research and motivated this researcher. The

combination of experiences raised a level of consciousness, which fuelled creative thought and guided the eventual research direction. However, habits of thought, word and deed do not make for quick or easy change: this was a slow-burning development. Steeped in the process of traditional assessment, I was slow to question the incongruence of traditional assessment as a learning method, its capacity to fetter students, and its power, for good or ill, to train students' behaviour and attitudes. Paralleling this inertia was the even greater hesitancy to appreciate that with intervention one could bring about a worthwhile improvement and change of direction, which could strengthen the *learning side of assessment*, hence furthering the personal and professional capacity of the learner. Pearson and Nelson, (2000:38) rationalise this slow comprehension, adding substance to the reasoning here and the arguments above on conformity with their observation 'you can become so accustomed to seeing . . . situations in a certain way that your senses do not pick up on the obvious' In this case the point was proved correct.

#### **1.4 INITIATING THE RESEARCH**

The research comprised two phases. The initial, Action Research (AR) phase of this study began in higher education in 2005/06 with reflection on the practice of assessing group-based activities. I lectured first-year Education and Training Degree Programme students for a module in Personal Effectiveness and Communication in their first semester. It was the practice to allocate students to groups in order to investigate a subject and present their findings as a group. Each group was to be graded on the presentation and each group member was to receive that grade, regardless of input. On the whole the groups were co-operating and progressing with the work, but feedback from some students showed it to be having a negative impact. As is common in group-based activities one of the drawbacks, highlighted by this feedback, was the element of

unequal contribution of work by some students (Burd *et al*, 2003). The work was being carried out but it was observed that students were dissatisfied. While this factual report is accurate, its clinical account does not adequately reflect the extent of consternation felt by some students who were visibly emotional and stressed by the practicalities of working as part of a group in order to fulfil their project assessment. In an effort to bring out the more 'human' side of the context it is useful here to provide an overview of the student profile at that time.

The class of fifty-two full-time, first-year students was very diverse. Students fresh from completing their Leaving Certificate examination sat beside mature students who had long since left formal education and were picking up threads that would allow them the opportunity to further develop themselves personally and professionally. Also, there were various nationalities represented in the classroom. In addition, students were from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including students who had progressed from colleges of further education through a non-traditional Access Programme. Active in tackling equality of access and opportunity issues, the researcher's department (School of Education Studies), was committed to this Programme which had been developed to cater for students experiencing educational disadvantage or inequality. By the time these variables came together with the mix of gender, ability, including learning difficulties, age and cultures, the composition of the class could be termed as showing more diversity than would have been expected from earlier years. The increase in diversity in the student population presenting in higher education lecture theatres was an observation in line with the literature (Leung, 2000; the Department of Education, 1995; and Scott and Watson, 1994). Catering to such a diverse class of students challenges a teacher, but it is even more so where there is evidence to suggest that first-year students suffer a high risk of dropping out of college. (Lau, 2003; Hall, 2001; Healy *et al*, 1999;

Cope and Hannah, 1975). With these challenges in mind, any such student issue brought to the attention of a teacher commands immediate attention.

#### 1.4.1 PHASE ONE

The issue which warranted my immediate attention and acted as the catalyst for this research was raised by several students in one particular group. They expressed dissatisfaction with one particular group member, complaining that this student's poor attitude was causing conflict within the group and making it difficult to progress the work. There was considerable angst among the students: this group member was not contributing, but would still receive the same project mark as those members who had carried out the work. No issues were raised in relation to the group activity or work *per se*. Group work is acknowledged to be a positive and much availed of learning methodology in higher education (Boud *et al*, 1999; Bohan, 2002). Equally relevant to today's student, Jackson (1987: 85) provides a reason for why group work finds continuing favour with teachers as a learning methodology,

in his [her] professional career the graduate will almost always have to work with others in the performance of his [her] duties. A [group] project develops the student's ability to co-operate with others; to interact with others to exchange or obtain information; to participate in group discussions . . . and to share in the decision making process. The student also learns to exercise tact and diplomacy.

Personal experience of assessment of group-based activities, both as a teacher and as a student, had shown this to be a recurrent issue for students. To persist with the application of this traditional style of assessment would have been to ignore the stress and frustration felt by the learners. Duty-of-care as a teacher, clarity of insight gained through personal experience of the same frustration as a student, and prior experience in studying learner motivation made this an unacceptable option. A fact easily overlooked with modern practices is that assessment is a learning methodology: viewing assessment

as a learning methodology challenged own thinking. Although teaching methods were learner-centric and academically rigorous, students were uninvolved in the assessment process. To alleviate this student anxiety, an assessment method was sought which would permit the students to have an input and a greater degree of individual learner-control.

Guidance as to a possible way forward was sought. Trawling through the literature which outlined innovative assessment procedures brought P&SA to the fore as a form of assessment compatible with a learner-teacher partnership approach. This assessment style promised the possibility of giving the students an input into the design of the assessment. Furthermore, it would allow the freedom for each student to assess peers and self on the *process*, while maintaining the assessment of the *product* by the teacher. The design of the methodology finally chosen is detailed in Chapter 3. In the initial cycle, ninety percent of the marks were assessed traditionally (a teacher assessed individual written assignment) and ten percent allocated to the P&SA component. These details, together with student descriptors, venues, numbers of participating students, academic years, allocation of marks to P&SA and the type of assessment used are summarised in Table 1.3 below.

**Table 1.3: Studies**

<b>School/ College</b>	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Student cohort</b>	<b>P&amp;SA number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Assessment Type</b>	<b>% mark (teacher /P&amp;SA)</b>
<i>Higher Education</i>	<i>Own Practice</i>	<i>First-year undergraduate</i>	52	05/06	<i>Individual assignment/ group presentation</i>	90/10
Higher Education	Own Practice	First-year undergraduate, Foundation year	74	06/07	Individual assignment/ group presentation	90/10
Higher Education	Own Practice	First-year undergraduate, foundation year	95	07/08	Individual assignment/ group presentation	85/15
Higher Education	Own Practice	Final-year undergraduate (full-time)	61	08/09	Individual assignment/ group presentation	80/20
Higher Education	Own Practice	Final-year undergraduate (part-time)	25	08/09	Individual assignment/ group presentation	80/20
Secondary (urban)	*A.	Transition year	16	08/09	Individual report/ group presentation	50/50
Secondary (community school)	*B.	Transition year	10	08/09	Group assignment	0/100
Primary	*C.	Fourth class	12	08/09	Group presentation	0/100
Further Education (rural)	*D.	Senior learner	7	08/09	Group report	0/100
Further Education (urban)	*E.	Senior learner	8	08/09	Group report and presentation	0/100
Further Education	*F.	Early school leavers	6	09/10	Group presentation (collage)	60/40

\* Keyed to retain anonymity

The aim of the initial phase of the P&SA study had been ‘to ascertain whether students’ motivation could be improved in group work by altering the style of assessment’ (Harrison 2006). The application of P&SA was coincident with positive changes in student behaviour: research findings at that time confirmed that while taking part in this form of assessment, students appeared to be more motivated. There was also evidence

to indicate that they showed greater interest in the subject matter and were more engaged in providing help and feedback to each other. This was attributed to the students actively participating in the design and execution of their own assessment, which is in line with much published research on this subject, for example, Brown *et al* (1998), Cheng and Warren (2000), McDonald and Boud (2003) and Fawcett (2005). Chapter 4 outlines findings, some of which formed part of own Master's dissertation, alongside the current research findings.

Following the submission of a report of the initial study as a Master's dissertation, the study was continued into Phase One, which comprised two consecutive cohorts of first-year students taking the same module as the original cohort of first-year students. This part of the study also retained an AR approach. The format and conditions of the initial P&SA were maintained with minor exceptions. This was in an effort to determine whether the positive changes in student motivation and engagement observed in the original study would be repeated with subsequent student cohorts. There were two overall differences which had to be factored into the study. Firstly, due to the apparent positive outcome of the initial study, there was a further gradual increase in the allocation (up to twenty percent) of the module marks to P&SA in subsequent studies (detailed in Table 1.3 above). Secondly, the first-year students who had been part of the initial AR cycle of P&SA had, by default, progressed and were now second-year students. This meant there were no second-year students to draw on as a control group. For this reason it was decided to retain the original second-year control group results as a baseline for comparison.

During this stage Teacher H. (see Table 1.4 below) expressed his interest in conducting P&SA with a class. Briefed in the assessment format and conditions, he carried out an adapted form of the P&SA in second semester with the class of first-year students who

had experienced P&SA with me in the first semester. His observations are reported in Chapter 5.

#### 1.4.2 PHASE TWO

The indications from Phase One suggested that the findings were comparable with the results of the initial study. This, together with a review of the literature, prompted the wider-ranging research question:

*To what extent can P&SA, within a group-based learning context, sustain all lifelong learners; and:*

*Within the same context, can P&SA increase learner motivation, engender self-efficacy, and facilitate a sense of self-direction?*

The aim of Phase Two was to construct a satisfactory answer to these wider concerns. As the questions concerned the lifelong learner, the study was broadened out both within mainstream education and into further education. In addition to higher education students, participants included primary and secondary students, early school leavers and senior learners, together with their teachers and, where appropriate, programme co-ordinators.

Higher education students involved: (a) the same full-time, first-year students who had participated in the initial research, but who were now in the final year of their honours degree programme, and (b) the final-year students on the *part-time* honours degree programme. Finally, the research included teachers who contributed (through interviews on their own experience of P&SA), but who did not take part in the studies. These contributing teachers are outlined in Table 1.4 below, together with their student cohort categories, the academic years in which they carried out the P&SA and the description of those assessments. Teacher H. lectured in a single subject in higher



education. Teachers G. and I. were lecturing in the same higher education institution as myself. Teacher J. was a participating student in one of my studies. He worked in further education and had carried P&SA into his own classroom. The findings from these teachers are outlined in Chapter 5.

**Table 1.4:** Teachers who contributed to the research, but did not take part in a study

School/ College	Teacher	Student Cohort	Year	Assessment Detail
Higher Education	*G.	First-year undergraduate	07/08	Two modules – followed line of initial study, but without researcher supervision
Higher Education	*H.	First-year undergraduate	06/07 07/08	One subject – group presentation and oral questioning
Higher Education	*I.	Postgraduate	08/09	Formative only
Further Education	*J.	English (foreign language)	07/08	Peer marked written tests

\* *Keyed to retain anonymity*

Prior to these studies none of the students, the teachers or their organisations had experienced P&SA. According to circumstances, the teachers had been using a combination of traditional teacher-led assessment methods including individual or group studies, written papers, oral or written tests and terminal examinations. In all studies the assessments were based on students working in small groups. This decision was pragmatic: firstly, the initial experience of P&SA was in a group work context; secondly, the assessment design (see Chapter 3) was already in place and in use. As previously mentioned, the decision to maintain the format and P&SA conditions helped conserve consistency in the studies. Keeping each study as consistent as possible improved effectiveness in collaborating with each teacher. Also, eliminating as many variables as possible helped maximize the validity and reliability of the research. Marshall and Rossman (1999: 192, 193) communicate this purpose when they argue that

the strength of a qualitative study that aims to explore a problem or describe a setting, a process, a social group, or a pattern of interaction will rest with its validity. An in-depth description showing the complexities of processes and interactions will be so embedded with data derived from the setting that it cannot help but be valid. Within the parameters of that setting, population, and theoretical framework, the research will be valid.

The teachers allocated students to groups to work on a project and although the end *product* of the project was assessed by the teacher, the *process* was self- and peer-assessed. In all cases students chose their own criteria. The split of marks varied. The initial study had allocated ninety percent of the marks to the teacher and ten percent to the students for the P&SA. Heed was taken of East (2005) who advised starting with a relatively small proportion of the overall assessment. In later studies, teachers surrendered between ten and one hundred percent of the marks to the students' P&SA. This is illustrated in Table 1.3 above. P&SA was anonymous (under examination conditions) with the students having the right to appeal, as advocated by Willis *et al* (2002), the teacher acting as final arbiter. Having a right of appeal was seen as important as, with some cohorts, this mark contributed to their final graduating grade.

## **1.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

While conducting internal studies, due care was taken to enlist the permission of the Head of Department and all participating students. An introductory letter together with the consent form and plain language statement was provided to the external institutions taking part in the studies. Their students' permission was also sought and confirmed by way of letters of consent to parents and guardians where appropriate, and this correspondence was accompanied by plain language statements of the purpose and conduct of the research. The ethical obligations of the college in relation to research involving human subjects were adhered to throughout the course of the study and

confirmed by obtaining sanction from the university Ethics Committee (see Appendix A, A1-A4).

## **1.6 LIMITS AND DELIMITATIONS**

*Phase One* of the research was confined to own lectures. As noted already, this phase of the research was carried out in a similar manner to the initial study, but without a second-year cohort of students to draw on as a control group. This was compensated for by the retention of the initial second-year study group results, which provided a baseline for comparison

Participant numbers were dictated by class size: smaller class sizes led to easier groups to organize and co-ordinate, but smaller sample sizes. Conversely, larger class sizes increased organizational complexity and co-ordination workload, but gave larger sample sizes.

A common factor throughout *Phase One* was the tutor. This provided consistency in the application of the trials, but makes it difficult to attempt generalisation to all teachers. As the students were all first-years in mainstream higher education, this limits generalisation to the wider student body, especially with current emphasis on lifelong learning.

*Phase Two* was spread more widely among the lifelong learning population, with different teachers, leading to more generaliseable results but with relatively small sample sizes from a vast population.

All the studies, save for one study which tracked one higher education class through first year and their final (degree) year, lasted for one semester. It will take long-term

studies to demonstrate the validity of the findings in all cases over a generation of learning.

All surveys were limited: in Phase One only one control group was available, limiting the validity because of a lack of a stable baseline of conventionally assessed students. In Phase Two, two issues arose. Firstly, the control groups were not separated from the study groups during the trials, possibly affecting their attitudes, which may have caused some distortion of responses. (For this reason, the participants in the control groups were confined to completing questionnaires and no other data were gathered from these students). Secondly, the effects examined may be long-term and may not show significant results following one episode in P&SA.

All of the trials took place within a group-work context; although the literature suggests that the findings should be generaliseable over a wider scope of methodologies, this will need further practical determination.

## **1.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

According to Durant (1926: 76), in summarising Aristotle's characteristics of man, 'we are what we repeatedly do', and as such, habits (such as long-standing, questionable policies) may be difficult to break if attention is not drawn to them. One such habit which is in need of review has been identified as the monopoly of teacher-led assessment. This chapter situates the research study within the wider conceptual framework of the development of the individual and society, and provides a rationale for the pursuit of a learner-centric assessment paradigm.

The participant stakeholders and the two phases of the research are introduced in this chapter. A description of the teachers and students involved in the study, their ages,

educational level and sector are presented. The scope of the research is identified. The research questions pertaining to Phase One and Phase Two are outlined together with the research rationale. The context of the research is also provided, including a description of the initial AR study of P&SA and its effect on student behaviour. The chapter goes on to describe the development of Phase One of the study with the aim of substantiating the initial findings, and its progress into Phase Two as a broadening of the study scope.

Ethical considerations are outlined and the limits and delimitations of the research are identified.

Finally, this chapter outlines subsequent chapters, wherein are described the views of theorists and researchers reported in the literature, the theoretical underpinnings and implementation of the research, together with the findings and conclusions.

## 2 PEER- AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

*Your brain changes when you are introduced to a new person, when you hear a bit of gossip, when you watch the Oscars, when you polish your golf stroke – in short, whenever an experience leaves a trace in the mind.*

Pinker, 2002: 86

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Many learners could argue that in particular their experience of assessment not only leaves a trace, but, for some, it has made an indelible mark on their minds. The Irish Leaving Certificate examination is one example where the employment of telephone ‘help lines’ is seen as a necessary support for learners suffering from stress as a result of experiencing this summative form of assessment. Morgan (2005) describes how traditional methods of teaching and learning, including assessment, can perturb the young teenage mind. She claims the current system is out-of-date and that it not only fails to help young teenage students deal with everyday pressures of living, it actively compounds their problems, often resulting in young students developing psychological issues, particularly in relation to assessment. It can be argued that education is not a panacea for all of life’s misfortunes and that major changes have already been made in an attempt to bring the system more into line with facilitating work and life needs. However, Morgan does make a valid point when she claims young people still pass through an out-of-date educational system which has changed little in form from that experienced by generations who have preceded them. This pertains to the Irish Leaving Certificate examination, and it would also appear to apply equally in other jurisdictions. For example, England long ago replaced the Leaving Certificate examination with the General Certificate of Education. This was succeeded by the Certificate of Secondary Education, the General Certificate of Secondary Education, and then a revised General

Certificate of Education. However, despite the successive changes, the milestone of a summative matriculation for entry into tertiary education persists.

Broadfoot (2003) regards assessment as a dominant factor in modern society, a representation of society's obsession with valuing that which is measurable, holding that traditional assessment primarily measures explicit learning. Assessment is driven by perceived needs of modern business, which embraces the culture of valuing what may be (easily) measured and discounting what cannot. She sees this attitude as becoming a pervasive influence, with a proliferation of experts in the valued measurements. The acceptance into management techniques of 'scientific assessment' (such as personnel appraisal, performance indicators, business inspections, audits and league tables) serves to both bolster the idea of valuation by measurement and provide motivation for its own maintenance and growth as an ideology. Thus, the progress of society is caught in a self-referential trap: if we see development as only indicated by measurements, then we are committed to enhancing those measurements and measurement tools by adding to them, to enable us to see the value of our future developments. Concluding, she calls for a realignment of assessment to make it more 'intuitive' and to free learners from the burden of public examination, which would then allow for enhancement of learning. Such liberating changes in assessment she sees would necessitate in turn a total realignment of curricula and of learners' dependence and their outlook on learning.

Describing *assessment* in its different forms, Race (2007) claims that for many learners their quest for learning is shaped by assessment. He wonders whether any significant level of learning would ensue in its absence, but is more definite when he describes assessment as overtaxing to both teachers and students. With this in mind he urges attention to be turned to improving assessment as 'a driver for learning' (p 9). The

NCCA (2004: 23) acknowledges that there are two ‘principal functions of assessment, *assessment for learning* and *assessment of learning*, instead of the more familiar categories of formative, diagnostic, summative, and evaluative assessment’, with the formative, diagnostic and evaluative functions incorporated into *assessment for learning*, and summative into *assessment of learning*. Firstly, they characterise *assessment for learning* by the focus on giving feedback to the learner, or on planning future teaching to better satisfy learners’ needs. Secondly, *assessment of learning* is described by the concentration on recording the learner’s progress and academic achievement over a certain learning period or module.

In general, assessment can be classified theoretically in different dimensions: criterion-referenced *versus* norm-referenced; *assessment of learning versus assessment for learning*. Norm-referenced assessment is used in order to rate student outcomes according to rank order with no pre-defined marking criteria, for instance in public examinations in which the control criteria for the examination rely on certain quotas of students achieving certain grades. Criterion-referenced assessment is drawn on to determine whether students have satisfied specific performance criteria, and focuses on the student’s ability in certain knowledge and skills. It may be readily seen that examinations which purport to be criterion referenced, but in which marking is ‘adjusted’ to maintain reasonable levels of passes, actually fall into the category of norm-referencing. (When used to measure aptitudes in practical skills, criterion-referenced assessment is often referred to as competence-based assessment, commonly used in assessment of outcomes in apprenticeship training).

At all levels, during these studies, focus naturally fell on both *assessment for* and *of learning*, employing a combination of summative and formative elements. In addition,



the assessment encompassed both criterion- and norm-referencing aspects. (The assessment design is outlined in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.5).

This chapter introduces a form of assessment, P&SA, which appears to offer the capacity, through learner involvement, to alleviate some of the distress pointed out by both Morgan (2005) and Race (2007). It also examines the impact of assessment practice on the learner's well-being and investigates how assessment could sustainably support the learner.

The potential of P&SA to promote skills and attitudes of self-reliance and interdependence are considered in this chapter. Such skills and attitudes could cultivate a learner's sense of self-direction, responsibility and *confidence-in-self*, in turn sustaining lifelong learning. With this in mind the chapter explores the current culture of assessment and its impact on both the learner's employment prospects and the ability of the educational system to satisfy the needs of employers as end users of the system.

In addition, the chapter provides an illustration of the necessary mode of deliberation needed for critical, analytical thought to foster a learner's skill of discernment, encouraging reasoned lifelong decision making. It also explores the area of motivation and its significance to the learner and learning outcomes.

A background to and summary of P&SA are outlined which detail the views of users and findings of researchers into this learning methodology. The Irish policy on assessment, as contained in the national curricula and in proposed developments of the curricula, is also discussed.

## 2.2 ASSESSMENT CULTURE

The practice of assessing the individual's success in learning for the purpose of employee selection for jobs dates back at least to the Han Dynasty in ancient China (206 BC-220 AD). During the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD), the imperial competitive examinations held for the 'degrees' which allowed admission to the imperial state administration (the Civil Service of the day) flourished. Moore (2009) recounts that, by around 1000 AD, 15,000 applicants were assessed by examination annually, of whom about 1,500 were awarded degrees and filled the vacancies in the bureaucracy. The power of bureaucracy is so enduring that to this day the most powerful civil servants in Britain are termed 'mandarins', referring to the Chinese roots (MacGregor, 2009).

The practice of selecting individuals on their academic record continues today. Assessment milestones are rites of passage. Tovey and Share (2000) identify three key educational milestones in Ireland, each of which is closely allied to the Leaving Certificate examination: these three key landmarks divide learners into three categories. These are characterised as follows: 1) the student group who leave mainstream education before reaching the Leaving Certificate; 2) those who leave mainstream education immediately after the Leaving Certificate to take up employment or enter a manual trade, and; 3) those entering traditional third-level institutions, likely to progress to professional-type employment. They also note that, despite great increases in policy and government funding and intervention, research indicates that a major influence on educational attainment remains socio-economic background. This disadvantage through background persists, despite being long understood and addressed by the Irish government. Tovey and Share put forward three factors as possible influencing variables: cultural difference, economic difference, and 'the nature of the educational process itself' (p 180). It can be argued that the education process continues to

perpetuate a practice of summative assessment, the Leaving Certificate examination, which is not only the antithesis of inclusivity, but has been historically a marker of difference between lower and upper socio-economic classes. This accords with the NCCA's Submission to the National Strategy for Higher Education (2009). In this they acknowledge that the main value placed on the Leaving Certificate examination is the accrual of points. These points control access to third-level education: the ready acceptance of a points system to place value on the grades achieved at this level underlines the perceived use of the assessment – to select for preparation for the professions. That is not to imply the policy intent behind the introduction of points was to be divisive or elitist, but that appears to be the general perception. The Submission to the National Strategy for Higher Education (2009) stresses that one of the original aims of the Leaving Certificate examination was to recognise achievement, but that this has been displaced by a competition for points: they accept that although rote, shallow learning is not an aim of second-level education, there is a perception that it is what is needed to maximise points. The balance between assessment as a selection tool and assessment as a learning methodology is, they accept, out of balance here.

### **2.3 BUSINESS WORLD AND ASSESSMENT**

In a competitive system, learners who are well suited to traditional assessment practice (shallow-learning of often seemingly unconnected facts) thrive. However, there are many individuals who are able, competent and talented in 'other' skills, such as oral communication, intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, organisational ability, good judgement, critical thinking and creativity. These learners are under-served by their assessment provision and can become imbued with feelings of low self-worth and their sense of self-efficacy diminished. Some students seem more at risk than others: McCormack and Archer (1998) explain how some students seem able to pick up on

teacher and school expectations. With little evidence of academic success in their family's history, they quickly draw the conclusion that they appear to be heading for the common family outcome. This causes them to withdraw early from education, a particular danger to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a duty-of-care is due to all students, it is unethical to disregard this short-fall in their assessment service.

In an effort to right the perceived discrimination faced by learners already disadvantaged by their backgrounds, Quinn (1998), a contemporary respected and successful employer in Ireland, offers the wisdom of his life and commercial experience. Discussing the Irish Leaving Certificate, he points out that this assessment is used, mistakenly in his view, by society and employers at large as an indicator of general ability: students with this qualification command respect, the greater the marks, the greater the return from employers and society while the converse is true. He finds from experience that selecting employees by this criterion is flawed, reporting that ability to achieve success in the Leaving Certificate examination does not automatically equate with the ability to perform well in a job. Stressing the necessity for employees to possess relational skills to work well with other people to get the job done, he rejects the idea of employees needing to be directed, preferring to deal with self-directed employees. It is fair to deduce that if these skills are required, they are not readily apparent in employees or applicants who have a good result in their Leaving Certificate. It would appear that the culture of depending on a higher authority – the teacher – to direct and assess work is a transferable skill, although it has well outgrown its usefulness by the time the learner first appears in the workplace, where self-directed behaviour is called for.

In a 'wish list' form, Quinn offers six ways of building an educational model which he believes could provide both a more equitable outcome for learners and an education

which is more relevant to a working life in the business world. It is a model which asks ‘not “what do you know?” but what can you do?’ (p 128). His vision takes the spotlight away from the narrow focus of attaining academic grades, to an educational system which casts more light on the practical aspects of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and the importance of the *relational*. His wish list is outlined in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1:** An education system end-user perspective – employer and the lifelong learner

1	Employers want flexible employees with the ability, and the desire, to learn. Now more than ever, knowing how to learn to be able to take advantage of lifelong learning is of paramount importance, both for work and life itself
2	Employers want employees with initiative – most recognise that the core strength of any business is its employees, and their willingness to think critically, laterally and independently will be what places their business ahead of the competition
3	Employers need employees with a balance of knowledge and skills – this is what people should be taught. Rather than the current focus on knowledge, the emphasis should be on competences (with emphasis on communication, the basis of relating effectively)
4	Employers want employees who can apply both the knowledge and skills they have learned – practical application of both knowledge and skills should be taught
5	Linked to the fourth wish, school-leavers should have experience of the world of work, so their learning and abilities are situated in context – this gives advantages to both learner (able to envision their skills in the correct context, and with a feel for any latent entrepreneurial skills they may possess) and employers (knowing their employees will not have to go through the major transition of the differences between school and work life)
6	‘Teamwork will be by far the most common work method of the future’ (p 131). Experience in teamwork during learning is invaluable to learners who may have to work most of their life as part of a team, whether as a link in a chain of a process, or as part of a physical team working on projects.

Source: Adapted from Quinn (1998: 124-131)

More recently, in the education world, the call for “‘know-how” and “‘know-why”, not just “‘know what”” is reiterated by Deakin Crick (2007: 136) who argues for a fundamental change of thinking in relation to assessment and learning. She underlines that the *self*, ‘knowing who “I am, where I am coming from, where I am heading and why?”’ is inextricably woven into the fabric of the learning environment and experience. She further argues that learning must *empower* individuals – develop their

scope for self-awareness, their ability to become responsible for self and the skills to organise their lives – in addition to building their knowledge base. Her thinking dovetails the practical with theory in support of the learner. This outlook reflects a balanced approach, bearing the hallmark of a ‘holistic’ education, which here again draws on Gardner’s (1993a) theory of Multiple Intelligences.

## **2.4 SUSTAINABLE ASSESSMENT PRACTICE**

It is impossible to consider assessment practice, including P&SA or any other learning methodology or environment, without referring back to the teacher. The centrality of the teacher is acknowledged to affect not only aspects of the learning process, but also the individual’s short and long-term perception of her/himself (discussed in, section 5.2). Accordingly, this learned self-perception can be internalised by the learner to shape future learning and her/his personal contribution to society. Ultimately, the development of learners to serve *self* and the common good of society is the purpose of education. Hence, the teacher’s role is to serve this purpose.

Tough (1979: 80) suggests that ‘if we use talk as a means of supporting and extending children’s learning then we must select what we say with the same awareness and deliberateness as we would when we select and use other resources’. This assertion can be applied to all learners throughout their lifelong learning, and is not an easy concept to adhere to in practice. Wragg (2001: vii), indicates the innate difficulties in even recognising such teaching concerns, much less addressing them, as he points out that ‘teaching consists of dozens of favoured strategies that become embedded in deep structures . . . many decisions are made by teachers in less than a second . . . these *deep structures* . . . are not always amenable to change’. However difficult change is, it is

time to pause the scramble up the academic achievement ladder to evaluate the wall of values it is leaning against.

Rousi *et al* (1997: 23) state that ‘the communities and cultures of which we are members determine our ways of seeing the world’, a view corroborated by the Department of Health and Children (2002: 14), which maintains ‘culture is the way we learn to think, behave and do things’. There can be little doubt that learners are trained in a culture of seeing assessment through the eyes of the teacher.

The following advice to new teachers serves as a reminder and an illustration of one way this training can be communicated, reinforced and perpetuated in the classroom. Seeking to guide the new pedagogical teacher, Roffey (2004: 18), offers clarity on the individual’s new teaching role in the classroom as distinct from the one s/he held previously as a student, stating,

the student role implies being a learner, being directed, and having individual responsibility for your own work but not for anyone else. The role of the teacher is one of authority. It is the teacher who determines the content and process of lessons, awards marks and is responsible for all the students. It is your role to be the director of proceedings – do not relinquish this.

The obvious strength of this conviction and the challenges faced in attempting to change this view to an outlook which embraces learner/teacher partnerships is revealed in Roffey’s final sentence above. Her advice also makes it clear that the learner is the one to be steered and the teacher is the one to do the steering, making it demanding, if not impossible, for the learner to develop skills of self-direction or to achieve equity of status with the teacher through a partnership approach.

Teacher-directed assessment is built on controlling an assessment channel through which students are shepherded to the end of their journey. The journey ends with the

end of the teacher's direction. Thus, this model represents short-term thinking, one which can neither engender self-direction nor sustain lifelong assessment. However, sustainable assessment 'can be defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs' (Boud, 2000: 152). Discussing this point, Boud concedes to the requirement of assessment for awarding qualifications, but asserts that lifelong learning necessitates the involvement of continuous self-appraisal. He also advocates that, set against specific performance standards, the learner can determine own success in meeting them. The learner can, he advises, also seek further feedback from related peers/colleagues/associates. Through this self-appraisal and the feedback from others, Boud claims the learner can make necessary adjustments, helping improve future endeavours. His encouragement of learner involvement in conducting assessment and appraisal within as many environments and circumstances as possible to build capacity is, he considers, a work in progress. He believes this work will require revisiting as perceived wisdom makes way for new assessment enlightenments. This is in line with an interdependent approach to lifelong learning which adds the synergy, which Boud recognises in his belief that through this route, students can add to their own and others' learning. Thus, he argues, learners can become capable of assessing self and peers, and become part of sustainable lifelong assessment. Linking the skill of assessing self and peers to the promotion of self-learning, Kirby and Downs (2007: 489), argue that 'self-learning is a valuable component of "education for life", and the building of confidence for this must take place at some stage'. Self-learning is defined by the European Commission (2007: 8) as 'gaining, processing and assimilating new knowledge and skills as well as seeking and making use of guidance'. Acknowledging self-learning as a life competence for the learner, they stress the learner's confidence and motivation as essential ingredients.



It is argued that through the process of P&SA, with continuously assessing the work of others and reappraising own work in the light of feedback from self and peers, learners are also learning to become *self-reliant*. Self-reliance, according to Barnett and Hallam (1999: 138) is a quality needed by graduating students ‘to cope with and to act purposively in a . . . supercomplex world’. Pointing to the individual as being *responsible* for self in meeting and overcoming life challenges, they view higher education as the likely body for promoting these merits. It can not be expected that by the time learners reach higher education they can be lectured into having an abiding sense of responsibility and self-reliance, if during preceding years of their life these characteristics were left dormant, or worse, were impeded by earlier learning, including assessment. Learning to become self-reliant and self-responsible are ways of living best fostered from early childhood (in the home, community and education). As illustrated below, adolescence can leave vulnerable students prone to peer-pressure. It can be added also that, in the relatively short space of time which has elapsed since these observations were made, learners continue to be challenged by increasingly rapid societal and global changes. As a consequence, there is a great need for the immediate development of partnership and interdependent approaches to support the learner, and ultimately the wider community. Watkins (1999: 16) argues that in a fast changing world education has to equip learners to ‘learn about their learning’ in all situations to foster the learner’s sense of self-efficacy. In order to achieve this aim, he argues learning institutions need to ‘function more like learning organizations than like learning [assessment] factories’. A learning organisation is one which embraces inclusive values, welcomes every contribution (including from learners) and builds on a community of shared practice. Through an interdependent approach the individual is encouraged to achieve potential of *self* and others within the organisation (society) to ensure the common good.

It is not a big leap to see that these values equate with the democratic organisation, as defined by Knowles (1990: 101) where there is a 'spirit of mutual trust, an openness of communication, a general attitude of helpfulness and co-operation, and a willingness to accept responsibility, in contrast to paternalism, regimentation, restriction of information, suspicion, and enforced dependence on authority'. However, a learning organisation as distinct from a static bureaucratic hierarchy means flexibility, the ability to change to adapt to changing requirements or circumstances. Words can confuse. To be more concrete than aspiration, words must be converted into tangible outcomes. In order to commit to a learning organisation which *liberates* (Freire, 1996), an authoritarian role must give way to one of partnership and interdependence. Table 2.2 illustrates how P&SA are more conducive to realising this aim than is the current practice of teacher/examiner assessment. It also depicts a route away from traditional assessment where the teacher orchestrates and as Cresson (2006) points out 'learners certainly participate . . . but the extent of self-direction and co-determination they may bring to it is inevitably circumscribed'.

**Table 2.2:** Authoritarian traditional vs. partnership peer- and self-assessment approach

	<b><i>Traditional Assessment</i></b>	<b><i>P&amp;SA</i></b>
<i>Teaching style</i>	<i>authoritarian</i>	<i>collaborative/interdependent</i>
<i>Teacher during learning</i>	direct syllabus, pace, assessment criteria	discuss syllabus, suggest pace, agree assessment criteria
<i>Learner during learning</i>	passive recipient, focus on satisfying teacher and examination brief	engagement, learn around syllabus (to enable discourse with peer markers), sharing responsibility for learning and assessment
<i>Teacher during assessment</i>	reflects on performance of all learners, marks all, distributes result	marks agreed portion, facilitates peer grading, distributes result
<i>Learner during assessment</i>	submits to assessment	carries out assessment, reflects on own performance, reflects on peer performance, grades self, grades peers, shares feedback
Formative	teacher questions, gives feedback, prompts reflection	peers discuss, engage in reflection, assess each other's work, <i>use</i> teacher for support and as resource
Summative	'authority' grades	teacher and peers grade (prior agreed split, for example teacher grades <i>product</i> , learners grade <i>process</i> ), shared authority, teacher validates
Unintended learning	conformity, dependency	critical thinking, judgement, reflection, independent, self-directed thinking, initiative, responsibility, accountability

Source: Researcher

## 2.5 ASSESSMENT – STRESS TEST

Systemic thinking underpins a holistic approach. A body works as a 'whole', which by its nature seeks to avoid separating the head from the heart during any learning episode or investigation, including this exploration of P&SA. To support this natural way of learning, the teaching approach must incorporate congruence between the effects on the learners in both the cognitive and affective domains. The guidelines introducing the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum for adolescents underline the necessity of ensuring a 'multi-dimensional' perspective when it comes to the learner (NCCA, undated *a*). It discourages any disentanglement of the learner's bodily health from the 'emotional, mental, spiritual, social, and sexual health' aspects. Emotional

health is the ‘ability to recognise and express feelings’ and mental health the capacity ‘to think and make judgements’.

It is not within the scope of this study to examine fully how stress such as that discussed by Morgan, above, can blight the life of a young person and her/his family. However, it is essential that students should be able to depend on their learning and learning environment, including assessment, to enrich their lives, helping to fortify them against psychological onslaught. The reasons are many. Left unabated, stress can culminate in depression. This menacing psychological condition is widespread and according to Jessen (2011: 44) ‘one in five of us will suffer from it at some point’. He further emphasises that the effects of depression appear to be increasing, pointing out that ‘the World Health Organisation predicts that by 2020, it will be the second biggest contributor to the global burden of disease, behind AIDS’. He is not only referring to adults. This condition is afflicting learners from a very young age. In providing education and support to suffers of depression, Aware (2009), report that currently in Ireland ‘1 in 10 adolescents aged 13 - 19 experience a depressive episode’ and that this form of mental illness ‘affects a person's thinking, energy, feelings and behaviour’. In an attempt to deal with this situation, the Organisation offers a ‘Beat the Blues’ Programme, which specifically targets students in second-level education.

Further psychological issues occurring with disturbing frequency are presenting in the form of eating disorders. McSharry (2009: 6) describes how preoccupation with self-image, and body image in particular, is especially prevalent in the teenage years, stating how, during her research with second-level students, ‘it became clear from interviews that peers schooled these teenagers on the body much more powerfully than did popular press or parents’. This observation on the power of peer-pressure can be related to assessment and to this study on two accounts. Firstly, it raises the competitive element

which flourishes among at least the teenage (second-level) student population.

Secondly, it emphasises the power of peer-pressure on students to conform to perceived norms (societal, including academic).

Traditional assessment, as a learning tool, not only fails to assuage these pressures, it aggravates them from early childhood education by separating student from student (absence of collaboration in pursuit of own academic result) and student from teacher (authority, no negotiation): taking that route provides learners with no facilitation in developing relationship skills. There is little opportunity to acquire skills of judging or thinking critically about, or the practice in examining or reflecting on the knowledge, attitude and behaviour of *self* and *others*, skills which are specifically fostered in P&SA. Also, students do not have the opportunity to practice other skills promoted during the preparation for P&SA such as teamwork, interpersonal communication, relationship building, negotiation, making reasoned decisions and taking logical steps (practice also provides more immediate reinforcement). Students are supported by the teacher during the facilitation of learning prior to P&SA in building *confidence-in-self* and in becoming (and becoming aware of being) capable and able, whereas learners following the conventional route of assessment are not facilitated by the teacher in gaining these competences. This applies to learners at all ages across the learning spectrum. These are all skills which the learner, at any age, can transfer easily to everyday living: they are necessary life-skills which are easily generaliseable and universally applicable.

Before leaving the subject of stress, it is important to note that unrelieved stress can cause a search for alternative means of alleviating the stress; easily available means, include mind altering substances. The NCCA (2005: 17), in a consultation document proposing an SPHE curriculum for senior cycle, emphasise that ‘one of the challenges of adolescence is learning to cope with the pressures presented by the availability of

mood-altering substances, including alcohol and drugs'. The proposed programme contains an element which is designed to afford learners the opportunity to explore drug related issues, among other topics.

Although young students have been identified as being at risk, this omnipresent danger is no respecter of age or learning milestone. It is well established that drink and drugs present with their own specific psychological and physiological health risks. There can be no doubt that drink and drugs can lead to fatalities and with certainty these substances can cloud judgement, adding further complications to the conditions described above. While it might appear that this discussion is neglectful of the more junior and mature learners in favour of the second-level learners, it must be granted that these issues are confronting all learners and are not confined to the second-level classroom.

Assessment should be the crutch, not the injury that leads to one. It needs restating that assessment can exert substantial emotional impact on the learners. Ingleton (1999: 9) puts perspective on this view by writing about the long-term effects of memories and feelings which can resurface at any time and how these emotions 'are ongoing in the maintenance of self-esteem and identity'. Of equal importance is the long held understanding of the physical impact on the body. Byers (1984: 29) relates that Ingham points out how one's emotions can affect the digestive and endocrine systems, claiming that systems need to be in homeostatic balance to maintain good health.

While it is not claimed that P&SA is stress free, learners do exert a measure of control over the situation and there is more student/student and student/teacher collaboration: having some control over a situation is known to lessen stress, as does a collaborative relationship. The learners not only develop collaborative relationships between

themselves, but if the teacher/student relationship is based on collaboration rather than power, this will reduce feelings of stress still further.

## **2.6     DEFINING MOTIVATION**

Reducing stress further also depends on the learner's level of intrinsic motivation.

Motivation covers a vast expanse of the research into human behaviour, bringing with it a comparable span of literature. Bishop (1997) attributes the origins of modern humanist theories of motivation back to the philosopher Abraham Maslow. His 1954 and 1970 works are perceived as seminal and his passion for this subject is shared by a lineage of prestigious authors, a few of whom preceded, and many who followed him. The following are notable examples of theorists drawn on in this work, all of whom have contributed significantly to the knowledge and understanding in this field:

Thorndike (1932), Hull (1943), Herzberg *et al* (1959), McClelland (1961), Rogers (1963 and 1983), Alderfer (1972), Kohlberg (in Kurtines and Greif, 1974), Seligman (1975), Weiner (1980), Deci and Ryan (1985) (and Ryan and Deci, 2000), Bandura (1997) and Curzon (2003).

According to Pintrich and Schunk (1996:4) ‘. . . *motivation* is derived from the Latin verb *movere* (to move)’. Ferguson, (2000:6) further adds that ‘. . . motivation energises and directs and leads to action’. Stepping away from the definition to establish the origin of energy in motivation, Weiner (1980: ch2) considers the theory of psychological energy wherein energy is “bound” by needs: when needs are fulfilled, the energy is released and available for use. Stemming from Freud's early work this thinking has developed to underpin subsequent theories of needs fulfilment and drive-reduction. This theory posited that satisfaction of all desires produces a state of full availability of an individual's psychological energy: a state of happiness. The selection

of learning (including assessment) strategies to motivate learners with the aim of optimising learning (utilising the full availability of the learner's energy to increase satisfaction) remains a significant challenge in education today.

In identifying specific states impacting motivation, researchers appear to have generally studied motivation theory from one of three points of reference, outlined in Table 2.3.

Whatever its classification, for progress to be maintained, the learner has to be motivated to continue learning. Curzon (2003: 224), in discussing motivation, defines it as 'a person's aroused desire for participation in a learning process' and suggests that most teachers would view it as 'essential to effective communication and learning'. He goes on to point out that whereas motivation assists learning, the lack of motivation often presents an active resistance to learning. This line of argument is underscored by Snowman and Biehler (2003: 438) who advise that if there is recurring misbehaviour in the classroom, it is an indication that the teacher needs 'to work harder at motivating the class'. The reason for this counsel is clarified by Gage and Berliner (1998: 312) who explain 'Motivation is what moves us from boredom to interest. It is motivation that arouses us, directs our activity, and maintains our behaviour over time'. They further argue the importance to the teacher of having a firm grasp of the various theories on motivation, as they claim these considerations underpin 'what and how we teach' (p 318).



**Table 2.3: Classification of motivators**

CLASSIFIED BY	CHARACTERISTICS	USE
<i>Type</i>	Consider only what motivates individuals at a point. For example, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Power, attribution, achievement (McClelland, 1961)</li> <li>► Task pleasure, extrinsic, interpersonal, intrinsic challenges, intrinsic outcomes (Ryan and Deci, 2000)</li> <li>► Intrinsic, extrinsic, personal standards (Bandura, 1997)</li> </ul>	These motivating factors are useful in examining specific circumstances
<i>Developmental stage</i>	Assumes people are motivated by different factors according to their level of moral or personal development. For example, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Existence, relatedness, growth (Alderfer, 1972)</li> <li>b. Pre-conventional, conventional, principled (Kohlberg, in Kurtines and Greif, 1974)</li> </ul>	Motivators which are important in a specific context can be identified from these types: for instance, it is necessary to determine the different stages or levels which are appropriate to this study to set the background for an understanding of the particular motivators in operation
<i>Hierarchy</i>	Assumes people have needs, interests, and these are hierarchical. Motivators are applicable to people when they are at a certain level of “satisfaction” of their needs and interests. For example, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Physiological, safety, social, esteem, self-actualisation (Maslow, 1954 and 1970)</li> <li>– Hygiene needs, motivators (Herzberg <i>et al</i>, 1959)</li> </ul>	

Source: Researcher

## 2.7 PRESENCE OF MIND

The reason the above mentioned skills of reflection, critical thinking, judgement and relationship skills (cognitive and metacognitive skills) are crucial to all learners is because they help generate *conscious thinking*. Facilitating higher order thinking or metacognitive skills can help offset ‘automatic thinking’, ‘low-effort thinking’, which Aronson *et al* (2005: 59) argue is how individuals spend the majority of time operating, describing it as ‘unconscious, unintentional, involuntary, and effortless’. The other side of the coin, they suggest is to manage how one thinks, using ‘controlled thinking’ (p 82) to analyse a position in a measured and decisive manner, a way of thinking which they recognise as being more demanding of the individual in terms of mental exertion. It is not unreasonable to argue that through the use and practice of these skills, the learner will develop greater acumen in consciously (and with reflection) making logical and

critically reasoned decisions, and will be more able to make those decisions with a higher degree of self-awareness. Basing decisions on reasoned logic rather than habit, or some other unconscious influence, makes for *common sense*, which has been defined as ‘something; which is there for all and which can be depended upon’ (Bowne, 1908: 27). It also makes for critical thinking which rests on the strength of one’s thought processes. Paul and Elder (2006) suggest that an individual’s capacity to evaluate one’s own reasoning is among the rudimentary principles of thinking critically, which they typify as ‘self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking’ (p xxiii). These characteristics are embodied in P&SA, drawing as it does on these concepts as the rules of engagement. Moreover, with a clear purpose of delivering an assessment result to self and peers based on this thinking, it can help motivate learners to engage with critical thinking to a much greater depth.

In addition to self-assessment, the skill of assessing peers provides opportunity for the learner to observe and evaluate the reasoning ability of others (earned by assessing peer work and observing peer behaviour and attitude). P&SA facilitate *conscious reflective thought*. The act of practising *conscious* thinking involves practice in the skills of deliberate reflection, critical analysis, judgement and decision making. Frequent practice in these skills leads to the automatic prejudged thinking being replaced by automatic considered judgement. Practising *conscious* thinking together with witnessing the practical outcome of a learning objective (stipulated in the assessment brief), can help the learner develop *confidence-in-self* and confidence in own judgement. This allows the learner to develop skills of discernment with which to judge whether reasoning is based on logic and reasoned insight on the one hand, or on an unconsidered, automatic, prejudged thinking response to authority or peer-pressure (to avoid standing out) on the other hand.

It needs bearing in mind that adolescence can be a particularly turbulent time, making young students vulnerable to peer-pressure as already discussed. There is a window of opportunity in childhood, which has been identified as a time where learners are perceived to be at lower risk of peer-pressure. It is during this time that P&SA can be readily exploited to sow the seeds for *conscious thinking*, enabling *confidence-in-self* to think critically, a forerunner of reasoned judgement, necessary for lifelong learning decision-making. This window of opportunity is highlighted by Hayes and Kernan (2001) who refer to the result of research which show that self-esteem in young (pre-teen) children appears to rely significantly on parental feedback. They claim that whilst there does appear to be a peer-pressure effect which increases with age, parental approval remains a strong influence throughout this age bracket

## **2.8 KEY SKILLS – SEEDS OF CHANGE**

It is important to note here also that the aforementioned skills (see Section 2.3) developed through P&SA include four of the five skills: ‘critical and creative thinking, working with others, being personally effective and communicating’ which have been identified by the NCCA (undated *b*) as crucial future skills which every learner has to master if s/he is to fulfil her/his learning and life potential (fifth skill is identified as information processing). Stressing their value, the NCCA point out that ‘in order that learners benefit from their interaction with the key skills, it is important that they would encounter them frequently and in an integrated way right across the curriculum’. A form of assessment, such as P&SA can be exploited to offer regular interaction with these skills throughout the lifelong learning spectrum of education. Quietly, the seeds of change and a greater appreciation of *peer-assessment* and *self-assessment* are currently germinating in the Irish curriculum, evidence of which is provided below in Section 2.10 of this chapter. While this is a welcome and necessary development,

assessment has always focused on feedback to the *self* in the form of examination result or other form of feedback. It is reasoned that *peer-assessment* as an accompanying learning methodology (starting in primary school) could bring with it invaluable strengthening, specifically of the skills of critical and creative thinking and working with others. It could also provide practice in other dimensions of personal effectiveness and interpersonal communication.

## **2.9 PEER- AND SELF-ASSESSMENT – STIMULATING ACTIVITY OF OWN MIND**

Assessment as a learning tool is not a recent phenomenon. From a theoretical standpoint, Topping (1998) and Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) embed peer-assessment in Vygotskian social constructivism, referring to the dialogic, interactive nature of the assessment being a co-operative knowledge-construction. They also relate the engagement of learners, particularly Topping who attaches importance to learners (peers) sharing the same level but with different opinions, to Piagetian development.

P&SA has been held in high esteem by past generations of practitioners, which is exemplified by Jardine (1818) who, in describing the benefits of peer evaluation (by students whom he terms ‘examinators’ (p 367)), recounts that students continuously under the scrutiny of peers who can assess their conduct are encouraged to use self-instruction; are afforded an increase in self-confidence; and are led to ‘take pleasure in the activity of his [her] own mind’. He further asserts that ‘when these objects are gained, the most valuable and the most difficult part of education is accomplished’ (p 407).

Jardine, while retaining the role of final arbiter, drew on peer marking in his Logic class with first-year students in higher education, to help reduce the workload and the time involved marking several hundred scripts. However, he invited only around a dozen

students who he considered the brightest and most knowledgeable to take part with him in the marking process. During this time he found that the marks students' afforded their peers closely resembled his own expectations (before students engaged in the peer marking, he, unbeknownst to the students, had looked over the scripts), and declared that the student who took first prize (as adjudged by peers) never failed to match his expectation. He further reports that in some other instances of marking it was not infrequent, on reconsideration, for him to favour the students ruling to his own.

He did point out though the import of keeping a firm hold on the peer marking process to ensure the 'examinators' were constantly made aware of the impartial and honourable behaviour that he expected from them as markers, which included the mandatory maintenance of strict silence and confidentiality in relation to their peers and the scripts. He reasons this step as a necessary precaution, stating that 'ignorance, conceit, partiality, and petulance, on the part of those juvenile assistants [peer markers], might give occasion to disappointment, chagrin, and irritation in the minds of such [peers] as conceived that their exercises had been unjustly criticised' (p 368). He claims that by taking these steps (and emphasising them close to peer marking time) such frustrations remained undisturbed. He looks at the real threat posed to the markers of coming under the influence of friends, but exclaimed that as each marker is one of many markers, there was little to be gained from being open to this risk. The repercussions of a peer marker succumbing to this influence, or breaching any guideline, are outlined by Jardine in his following description of the fate of such offending individuals, which he termed:

academical traitors, viewed with contempt and reproach; and, if the fact be proved against them, they are subjected to a forfeiture of their privilege as voters [markers], and deprived of the honours which they themselves may have otherwise deserved (p 390).

Expedience prompted Jardine to adopt peer-assessment, and while the evidence shows his satisfaction with the practice overall, he did raise a question mark over his selection of only a number of students to collaborate with him in the marking process, suggesting this practice would not necessarily be met with favour by others. As this current study is predicated on the values of inclusion and equity, it could not justify this practice, which could be construed as a form of discrimination. There is also the question of differentiating between students on the grounds of ability and the ill effects which could arise for a less academically able student, as a result of acting down to the teacher's expectations. His separation of students for the peer-assessment into examiners and examinees could be debated as a form of streaming, a practice which has also been shown to lead to feelings of frustration and exclusion (Hargreaves, 1967). However, in Jardine's case he makes no note of these issues (in fact his stance may have then been perceived as an improvement on the thinking of the day, whereas in today's society this stance would be considered a retrograde step).

### *2.9.1 REPOSITIONING THE LOCUS OF POWER*

Twenty-five years ago, Falchikov (1986) underscores the discontent of the day as she reports, 'the prevailing model of assessment in higher education has been described as an authoritarian one, involving the unequal possession and exercise of power . . . The student is clearly excluded from every stage of decision making' (p 146). To address this situation she puts forward findings of studies which were carried out, including P&SA, reporting that this form of assessment caused students to 'think more, learn more, and become more critical and structured' (p161). Her study involved areas of

student empowerment, necessitating areas of collaboration between teacher and learners, that to a degree differ from those involved in this study: in particular her learners assessed the mark for the final *product* of an individual essay, the mark being agreed in negotiation with the teacher. This contrasts with this current study, where students were empowered to mark the *process* without teacher input. At the end of the day, Falchikov, while decrying the tendency of traditional assessment to induce conformity in learners, argues this form of assessment (collaborative P&SA) led to a more responsible and autonomous learner, permitting opportunity to extend her/his inter- and intra-personal intelligence. Agreeing with her arguments, I would add further that there appears more of a *certainty* than a *tendency* that many students could cultivate conformist behaviour. Such behaviour would become deeply ingrained as a result of the conditioned response to the habitual practice of looking to ‘authority’ (teacher/examiner) to give directions, lead the way and provide feedback. As depicted in Chapter 1, this is made more possible because of the innate predisposition of humans to seek alternatives to the misgivings of standing on one’s own. This cultivation of conformist, dependent behaviour may be deduced from the learner’s observed behaviour. Otherwise vocal, responsive students can passively submit to the process of assessment. That this is long-term learning and not a short-lived effect can be construed from observation: the behaviour seems to be transferable or generaliseable, in that many people submit to authority, much of the time and without much questioning.

### 2.9.2 REPOSITIONING THE LOCUS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Further up the line, highlighting an increase in the call for self-directed learners, Creme (1995) debates learning contracts, student/teacher assessment partnerships and P&SA, among other considerations, as a means of developing learners’ skills of self-direction. Discussing P&SA she suggests this can help the teacher generate more time, promote

learner responsibility and provide learners with the opportunity to act in what is considered an adult role. Considering self-assessment as a convertible skill, she accepts that students may need to be trained in assessing self, but acknowledges that assessing self is an inherent every day activity which can be developed further. Although she raises the reluctance on the part of the learners' to mark themselves, she concludes they were as capable as she was herself in determining their own input. She also argues the benefits of peer-assessment to include a greater yield in learning through peer feedback, judgement skills and deeper learning as a result of engaging in the assessment process. Advising that students must be made familiar with all aspects of the assessment, Creme adds that in making space at the assessment table for the learner, the teacher has to release control. She cautions that even though this is part of the learners' becoming more responsible, this situation can create problems: however, she believes these 'are difficulties to do with their [learners] learning development: positive difficulties, worth working on' (p 146).

### 2.9.3 *THE RELUCTANT ASSESSOR*

In a more recent report of P&SA, Sluijsmans *et al* (2002) argue this method of assessment has been adopted by a large number of institutes over the past five decades. Examining the impact of training in peer-assessment on the learning outcomes of teacher trainees, they conclude that such training is beneficial in that it provides two major benefits. Firstly, it improves learning outcomes and secondly, having an input into the assessment and training leaves the trainee teachers feeling more contented. Although noting these advantages, they observed the reluctance of students to assess their peers, stating 'students are conservative and conditioned in their attitude towards teachers and assessment. They [students] still feel that the teacher is the expert and the only objective assessor'. They claim that by consciously and deliberately incorporating



the assessment of peers in a careful and rewarding manner into the normal run of the mill teaching methods, it may help redress this student fear by creating a supportive climate in which students can view peer-assessment positively.

A further study which highlighted the reluctance of students to mark peers was conducted with students who were studying a master's degree programme in marketing: in this, (Pope, 2001) reports similar hesitancy, observing that students displayed a temporary anxiety during the process. He further remarked that all agreed that peer marking should be confined to postgraduate students employed in work experience, and that it was totally inappropriate for undergraduate or younger learners. It may have been as a result of a natural tension, but he found students were slow to engage with the marking process.

Student apprehension in marking peers and self is understandable. It is a role which requires taking on responsibility and being held accountable; it would be easier to pass this role onto someone else (the teacher/examiner). In my observation, some learners can be startled and take time to adjust to the role: others take to the concept and practice with greater ease. Over time, with teacher and learner support, familiarisation and experience of the process, all of the learners develop a level of tolerance and acceptance of the role. From the teacher's perspective, some natural anxiety is also to be expected. One such unease relates to student marking and to the danger of mark distortion.

Exploring the correlation between tutor- and peer-marking, Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of forty-eight studies which had been carried out between 1959 and 1999. Their analysis compared the correlation of tutor marks with peer marks, and the studies were characterised by several variables, so they could be

compared by category and the effect of each variable could be separated out. Their chief, notable findings are summarised in Table 2.4.

**Table 2.4:** Peer-assessment: correlation of teacher- and student-awarded marks

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Peer Mark vs. Teacher Mark</i>
Marked on several different dimensions of performance (rather than judging one overall mark)	Poorer correlation <sup>†</sup>
Academic nature of assessment [test, essay] (rather than workplace/professional [demonstrating skills, practice])	Better correlation
Study design quality (higher <i>vs.</i> lower quality)	Better correlation
Student involvement in – deciding or agreeing – criteria (rather than teacher imposed criteria/solutions)	Better correlation
Number of peers (1-20) carrying out each assessment	Little effect*
Course level	No effect

<sup>†</sup> marking to several criteria separately gave much the poorest correlation  
good correlation was obtained for single global (overall) marks  
best correlation was obtained for a global mark, but with specific criteria to consider

\*very large groups (20+) corresponded to poorer correlation of marking – Falchikov and Goldfinch discuss the ‘social loafing’ effect observed in very large groups

Source: Adapted from Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000: 287-322)

As a result of their findings they offer practical advice to educationalists intending to employ this assessment practice. The recommendations in Table 2.5 which follow are presented *verbatim* to ensure the retention of their authors’ meaning.

**Table 2.5:** P&SA recommended practical considerations for implementation

- 1) Avoid using very large number of peers per assessment group.
- 2) Conduct peer-assessment studies in traditional academic settings and involve students in peer-assessment of academic products and processes.
- 3) Do not expect student assessors to rate many individual dimensions. It is better to use an overall global mark with well understood criteria.
- 4) Involve your students in discussions about criteria.
- 5) Pay great attention to the design, implementation and reporting of your study.
- 6) Peer-assessment can be successful in any discipline area and at any level.
- 7) Avoid the use of proportions of agreement between peers and teachers as a measure of validity

Source: Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000: 317)

#### 2.9.4 GROUP WORK – PEER- AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

Discussed previously in the introduction, group work is widely held to yield high returns both as a teaching and learning methodology. In their study with undergraduate students which explored P&SA in group work projects Burd *et al* (2003) describe this assessment style as a positive means of coping with assessment issues presented in group work, but they underline the need for teachers and learners to receive guidance in marking accurately.

In her attempt to instil a collaborative approach among students engaged in problem based learning activities in small groups, Bryan (2006), in common with this investigation, located an assessment method which could consider the learning *process* as well as *product (outcome)*. Bryan's further considerations were to establish whether the assessment could facilitate awarding individual rather than collective (group) marks and to see if P&SA could motivate (or increase motivation of) students to work efficiently as team members. She reports that, unsurprisingly, students were dissatisfied

with the pre-study situation where every group member was awarded the same collective group mark. This did not take into consideration a student who gave little input ('social loafing', or 'acting as a passenger'), or even when a particular group member's behaviour had adversely affected the group's outcome. In my teaching experience, this finding pinpoints a primary source of stress for learners, and a major shortcoming in traditionally-assessed group work. This fact was appreciated prior to my initial study and, as outlined in Chapter 1, it was my students' distress which acted as the catalyst for the initial research. P&SA appear capable of helping to minimise stress (particularly if used to award individual marks) because it factors in fair play by holding each individual accountable. It is designed to reward the student who does the work and who co-operates with peers in completing the task. Similarly, the students who do not contribute will receive a mark from their peers comparable to their peers' assessment of the value of their share of input. By design, through feedback, the student who was lax, uncooperative or remiss in any area will be made aware of her/his shortfall, facilitating future improvement.

Returning to Bryan's study, she found that P&SA contribute to collaboration in group work, is sufficiently flexible to be used in diverse settings, allows for recognition of individual contribution and acknowledges process and outcome. She also found evidence in the feedback back from teacher evaluation and monitoring reports that there was a perceptible improvement in the standard of work produced by the group. The time it took to carry out the assessment was found to be the one drawback. While claiming this as a disadvantage she is pointing to the time incurred in assessing group work in general, the aspect of time in relation to P&SA is not reported on. What is more, the additional time spent on P&SA must be weighed against the additional skills being learned. It may well be that, as more emphasis is placed on teaching and learning

personal development, relational skills and civic or social structure and participation, which seem apparent in many curricula from different levels and different jurisdictions, the gain in terms of skills learned will more than offset the time taken for the assessment procedure. Bryan also observes a similar ‘trade-off’ in including the learners in the selection of assessment criteria – apart from the benefits of learner engagement in both the process and assessment, the time allocated to deciding criteria was more than compensated for by the learner co-operation and lack of arguments during the group work.

Her study was trialling P&SA with a total of five tutor groups, and in four of these the P&SA marks did not contribute to the students final module marks; in the fifth group the assessment was modified and did contribute to the final module mark after tutor moderation of the marks. Although there were major differences between these studies and the research presented in this dissertation, much of the rationale and the findings are similar. Bryan (2006) cited reasons for the study which parallel reasons of my own: these include students engaging with collaboration and valuing co-operation and group dynamics, as well as students using reflective practice. Similarly, her findings of increased student motivation echo some of the observations in the prior, initial study of this research. For instance, she observed that the standard of students’ work improved, and their enjoyment of group work increased.

Before leaving this point, an interesting note which also relates to ‘social loafing’ is raised by Brooks and Ammons (2003), who analyse very closely a study of mostly freshmen undergraduates, in group work, with P&SA. They examine if peer group assessment, early assessment, multiple assessment, or provision of specific criteria affect free riding (social loafing), and if positive results are followed by better perception of group work as a learning method and team members working well

together. All results were positive, with the *caveat* that two consecutive assessments reduced extent of free riding, but further assessments showed no significant change.

#### 2.9.5 STUDENT ASSESSOR

Sadler and Good (2006) studied assessment in US middle school (11 to 14 years of age) science lessons, with one teacher and four classes. They compared the results of self, peer and teacher assessments and the effect on learning of carrying out self- and peer-rating as compared with control groups.

They found good correlation between self, peer and teacher marks corroborating the correlation found by Falchikov and Goldfinch (2002) discussed above. For the self-assessed papers, they found lower performing students tended to mark more leniently than the teacher. For peer-assessed papers, the papers of the higher performing students tended to be marked more harshly by peers than by the teacher. However, overall, the ranking of papers remained the same whether self-, peer- or teacher-assessed.

Compared to students who did not undertake P&SA, but followed the same course, peer-raters showed no significant change in learning, but self-raters showed a significant increase in their learning.

The study concluded that P&SA was beneficial, if carried out carefully, as it provided deeper learning for self-raters and saved teacher or class time in marking. They also recognised the partnership in power between students and teacher, but did not elaborate on any benefits that might accrue as a result of this.

Their recommendations included that teachers provide instruction in assessment, supervise the self- and peer-assessments for their consistency and accuracy. Blind peer marking is also recommended, which they explain protects confidentiality and helps

ensure impartiality. They acknowledge student empowerment in marking and the ensuing potential anxiety, and advise close supervision to help counteract this.

In my study, marking blind was inappropriate as students were marking their peers on the *process*: to grade a learner on the process, it is necessary to be able to observe the learner during the process. There must also be the awareness that reflection on that particular learner's behaviour, compared to the assessment criteria, will be the basis of the assessment.

#### 2.9.6 *SELF-ASSESSMENT – TRAINING*

On the subject of training, in a study exploring the impact of student training in self-assessment, with 256 high school students (14 to 18 years of age) over a school year, McDonald and Boud (2003) report students found the training to be of benefit overall. The researchers describe receiving a tremendous response to the self-assessment training, but qualify their statement by stating that this effect may have been, to a degree, prompted by the Hawthorn Effect: staff and students were new to the experience and the situation generated a lot of attention for participants. Following their survey of students' reactions, the responses were analysed by categorising them into common themes. Their findings show that students found self-assessment training 'allowed them to be introspective (98%), analytical (90%), critical (85%), independent (98%), empowered (83%) and to improve their study habits (98%)' (p 215). In relation to career guidance, students 'believed that they had higher vocational aspirations (77%), and were better able to choose careers suited to their personality (84%) since an essential ingredient of career choice is being able to make decisions about constructing, validating and applying criteria' (p 215). In summing up, they argue for the inclusion of the subject of self-assessment training to be included in the school syllabus, which

could provide a framework to facilitate the type of skill set necessary for students throughout their learning life.

#### *2.9.7 PEER- AND SELF-ASSESSMENT – ONLINE*

In a recent study of online assessment, Bouzidi and Jaillet (2009) describe the application of P&SA through the medium of information technology, as relatively new. The study was designed to explore the validity of peers as assessors, assuming the teacher as the baseline ‘perfect’ assessor.

In a literature review on the reliability and validity of peer-assessment, they report finding continuing debate from a theoretical standpoint. On the practical side, peer-assessment had been reported as appearing valid in small scale studies, but they note studies need broadening and carrying out on a much larger scale and in a standardised format.

Their study was carried out on assessment of second- and third-year engineering undergraduates (242 students) with the assessment taking the form of a traditional examination, but using a virtual learning environment (Moodle). The standard test paper was digitised and the completed digital answer sheets were then submitted anonymously to peers, self and/or teacher for assessment.

Their study concluded that peer-assessment was as valid as teacher-assessment, under specific conditions, when marked by four or more peers. The conditions include: clear questions requiring precise answers (‘calculations, mathematical reasoning, short algorithms and drafting of short texts’ (p 266)), in an ‘exact’ science subject, with a clear marking scheme, following practice for students in assessing, and with technical



guidance. They further found that when the assessment was carried out by self and peers, the validity was enhanced.

#### 2.9.8 *UNIVERSALITY*

The exploration of P&SA by various researchers finds, on a macro scale, whatever the commonalities or differences, and whatever the advantages and disadvantages, the overall impact of P&SA is positive. Some common or more notable findings from cases looked at in the text or listed in Table 2.6 are:

- ❖ ***Main benefits:*** more critical analysis, engagement and reflection, leading to deeper learning, more intimate knowledge; increases awareness of requirements and skill in assessment, benefiting learning (better understanding of and attainment of learning goals) and future life/career; perceived more fair and ethical than traditional assessment for grading group projects (leads to individual marks, not one shared group mark)(one study reported difficulty in objectively rating effort, but still reported students viewed it fairer than traditional rating); increased overall performance.
- ❖ ***Other benefits:*** motivating (compared with seeming irrelevant traditional assessment); broadens learning, giving wider feedback and necessitating assessing others' points of view; gives benefits of ownership of the learning process; allows assessment of group process, hidden from tutors, but important in developing team-building skills; responsibility.
- ❖ ***Accuracy of marking/grading:*** considered valid, accurate and reliable (some studies suggest a *caveat* of needing training and support) – at least as valid as teacher marking (some studies specify a minimum of four peer raters) – one study showed an increase in validity of peer-rating if self-rating is included. A few studies showed bias when compared with teacher marking – general leniency in peer-rating, harshness in self-rating.

- ❖ **Main disadvantages:** time taken, although in large classes can be offset by time saved in teacher grading assignments, and some comment on trade-off against extra learning gained (increased reflection and depth of learning for self-assessment; judgement and appraisal; broader outlook for peer-assessment; greater appreciation of assessment and more self-reliance overall).
- ❖ **Potential drawbacks:** student discomfiture – preference for marking by ‘expert’ – apparently diminished by training, but does not disappear; teacher discomfiture – reported as being from misgivings about student marking ability or accuracy (not borne out) to discomfort at relinquishing power and control.
- ❖ **Other findings:** suitability – general view appears to support early introduction, although more mature students see it as inappropriate for students younger than themselves [this may reflect a measure of how ingrained dependence on authority can become].

No dissenting voice could be located, but there are many calls for further studies to ascertain the actual boundaries of this assessment form’s applicability and to set appropriate terms of reference for its use. What may be surprising at first glance is the lack of any calls for standardisation. One reason may be due to the broad range of possible application of P&SA because it is universally applicable. The differences in each implementation which is listed in Table 2.6, demonstrate the method’s flexibility and malleability. These findings (Table 2.6) also provide an indication of the transferability of this assessment practice to almost any learning situation.

**Table 2.6:** Peer- and self-assessment – summary literature findings

AUTHOR(S)	YEAR	SUMMARY
Matsuno	2009	Compared self-, peer- and tutor-assessment (against criteria) of task product in undergraduate language students (4 teachers, 91 students). Generally peer-assessment produced useful, consistent, slightly lenient marks, with less range than teachers (low marks higher than teachers' low marks, high marks lower); marks were independent of rater's ability. Self-assessment produced low marks – much lower in high achievers. Teacher marks for each internally consistent, but all showed bias.
Chen and Tsai	2009	Online peer review used formatively with in-service maths and science teachers (52) in 3 rounds (6 weeks) on 4-month educational research course (on master's degree programme). Learners worked in groups (3-4) to present proposal which was assessed then modified and resubmitted for next round. Peer review was anonymous and individual. Criteria were given – <i>creativity, relevance, feasibility, suitability</i> . Found, with feedback, work improved significantly after round 1, but not in rounds 2 and 3 (but this varied by criterion dimension, with speculation it may be due to initial performance: <i>relevance</i> was good in round 1, showed little further improvement, while <i>feasibility</i> improved in different rounds. Other two improved after round 1, then no more significant change). Rate of improvement seems linked to amount of feedback.
Bouzidi and Jailliet	2009	Study of peer-assessment in year 2/3 undergraduates of 'exact science' subjects (engineering) (test answers open to little interpretation) – conditions are supervised examination setting, multiple questions (>9), clear marking scheme (rubric), test of about 2 hours: questions were screened for 'abnormalities'. Peer-assessment (minimum 4 peer-assessors) found trustworthy, and P&SA even more valid, with good design and support.
Tseng and Tsai	2007	Online peer-assessment of projects in high school (approximately 16 years) computer course (184 students). 3 cycles of peer-assessment during course (seen as ideal from prior studies (no significant result from 2 rounds, no extra significant improvement after 3 rounds). 10 peers and 1 or 2 teachers rated each project. All students appeared to benefit from feedback; peer rating was found internally consistent (reliable) and valid compared with teacher rating.
Cho <i>et al</i>	2006	Study of online peer review of graduate and undergraduate writing. 708 students, 16 courses, 4 universities, varied number of peer raters, well designed study with peer rating training and criteria laid out in rubrics to ease and standardise marking. Two rounds of draft papers marked, peer markers are graded for marking consistency and helpfulness of feedback (motivates to take task seriously). Particularly looked at student views of validity and reliability. Results confirmed peer rating as reliable and valid as teacher rating (at least 4 raters), but showed (by statistics) appearance to student could be to doubt validity and reliability on basis of spread of peer-rater marks.
Dutton	2005	Regular peer-assessment of group projects, used to reflect world of work: tutor mark is awarded for project, then multiplied by weighting factor calculated by averaging a mark shared between all in group across several criteria. Average gives a factor of 1, with uneven contributions resulting in a higher or lower weighting factor. Students rapidly settle to the system (introduced as assignments are given) and agree it fair, easy and straightforward.
Fawcett	2005	Second-year hospitality management students trained in peer-assessment; groups present out project work, assessed by peers in class – class given substantial training. Initial assessments with tutor presence, later with occasional supervision. Author discomfited at unsupervised assessment: moderation of presentation material backed up accuracy of assessment: 'the academic can make the judgement to withdraw and trust the students to perform the task with accuracy and integrity'. Performance in the presentation compared with a similar cohort showed dramatic improvement.
Sutherland	2005	Self-assessment in freshmen from disadvantaged backgrounds in University of Zululand (using English, second language). Found training needed for accuracy (best results after training, with rubric).
Wong and Ng	2005	Peer-assessment in high school students (13 – 14 years); online assignment submission. Student responses include little about peer-assessment – most issues technical about online assignment submission: only 8% responded with disquiet about possible unfairness of peer marking. It appears the younger it is introduced the better.
Sluijsmans <i>et al</i>	2004	Detailed, complex trial against controls (93 student teachers in 9 groups – 4 experimental, 5 controls). Hypothesis: peer-assessment (particularly setting and using criteria) can be taught as a skill. Found improvement in peer-assessment ability, but otherwise no significant effect on overall performance. Student teachers were (and felt) more <i>capable</i> but <i>not expert</i> in assessment afterwards.

AUTHOR(S)	YEAR	SUMMARY
Brooks and Ammons	2003	Freshmen undergraduates, in group work, with self and peer-assessment, to see if peer group assessment, early assessment, multiple assessment, or provision of specific criteria affect free riding (social loafing), and if positive results are followed by better perception of group work as a learning method and team members working well together. All results were positive, with the caveat that 2 consecutive assessments reduced extent of free riding, but further assessment showed no significant change.
McDonald and Boud	2003	Study on the effects on the quality of high school students' work of training in self-assessment skills (256 students plus 259 matching, randomly selected controls) from schools spanning the spectrum of achievement. Found the training created significant improvement, both overall and in each separate curriculum area.
Lejk and Wyvill	2002	Two groups of students: one used criterion-based peer-assessment (formative), the other holistic peer-assessment (summative). Holistic peer-assessment generated more positive view, while criterion-based peer-assessment a slightly more negative view.
Willis <i>et al</i>	2002	Studied perception of group work and assessment in problem based learning in medical undergraduates. Students motivated mainly by summative assessment methods (reducing perceived importance of long-term, holistic goals other research might indicate). Group work assessment seen by students as relevant to learning and useful for summative, not purely formative, purposes: should be peer-assessed, against self-set criteria, reflecting individual performance, but marking should be both peer and tutor, with an external arbiter in case of disagreement.
Pope	2001	Formative peer rating at masters level. Students reported improving skills due to viewing a wider range of work, and the motivational effect of knowing peers would assess their work. They gained insight into assessment methods and procedures, but felt overwhelmingly the method is only suitable for postgraduate students.
Li	2001	Used peer-assessment on engineering undergraduates to assess group work. Method was derived from Goldfinch's earlier work (see Conway and Kember, 1993 and Goldfinch, 1994). Found peer-assessment valid, with some (potential) bias problems. Put forward mathematical tool for 'normalisation' of marks, which would appear to work if format of assessment is well designed. Seems to be no check of whether normalisation works, or design is faulty (see Goldfinch, 1994 for alternative).
Bostock	2000	Formative assessments valuable, but without training or anonymity, summative assessment was of variable accuracy and quality. However, coursework assessed was of notably higher quality than previous years. Computer support for peer-assessment being developed.
Cheng and Warren	2000	Group project assessment from traditional common group mark to one including individual weighting calculated from criteria-based peer-assessment compared to group average. (Group mark, 50% tutor assessed, 50% assessed by rest of class, multiplied by factor which varied the mark by -15% to +10%). Results were considered significant – spread of grades for the module increased significantly, a third achieving a different grade from the rest of their group (7 pass grades, 2 fail grades). They reported an enriched learning experience for students through evaluation, self and group reflection.
Freeman and McKenzie	2000	Web based self and peer-assessment system for group activities in class sizes of 50 to 850, to resolve unfair team project assessment of giving all group members a common grade. Reduces complaints of 'free riders'. Seen as fair, ethical, effective – summative and formative.
Sivan	2000	Several groups of Higher Education students completing group work tasks, with two peer-assessed and one tutor assessed components. Oral presentation totally peer-assessed (30%), written assignment tutor assessed, weighted for individual by peer-assessment (70%). Benefits could be maximised by: ensuring relevance of assessment to student learning/future career; gradual, early introduction to build experience; student involvement in selecting criteria; assessing process (for individuals) not just group product.
Orsmond <i>et al.</i>	2000	Study of self- and peer-assessment in first year biology undergraduates. This study compared self, peer and tutor marking against given or student-constructed criteria. Found that students' criteria led to problems – lack of discrimination in marking and differing learning outcomes. Comparing given criteria with criteria agreed between student and tutor, or between students, showed no difference in correlation of marks (either with teacher or other students). Interpretation of much diverse data from the study can be otherwise confusing, a sign that the field has too many variables for a simple study to cover a broad range of peer- or self-assessment methods. For example, in student-designed criteria, no allowance is made for the 'integrated' reaction of even relatively untutored mind in evaluating over several criteria, a seemingly obvious potential reason for the results obtained. Significant, however, is that students thought P&SA made them (in decreasing order of significance) 'think more', 'critical', 'work in a structured way', 'learn more', 'gain confidence' and 'independent'; they found it 'beneficial', 'helpful', and 'challenging'.

<i>AUTHOR(S)</i>	<i>YEAR</i>	<i>SUMMARY</i>
McDowell and Sambell	1999	Found students wary of new styles of assessment, but generally see traditional assessment as irrelevant. Newer styles of assessment are more searching of actual learning and understanding (traditional assessment and 'cramming', foster shallower learning), give insight into the assessment process.
Roach	1999	First experience of self- and peer-assessment of group work with two classes of diploma students. Reports student reluctance to take ownership, but overall result 'higher than expected effort'. Lack of visibility of group process: suggests relinquishing process ownership would be balanced by more explicit support and guidance during assessment.
Zariski	1996	Self and peer-assessment in final/penultimate year law students (mainstream and adult learners; very high course entry requirements). 6 assignments in full year module. Criteria agreed in class, based on university-prepared assessment guide, assessment against rubric. Students paired – each completed an assignment and self-assessment: this was emailed anonymously to partner (with self-assessment) for peer-assessment. Tutor checked any extreme marks (>80% or <50%). Most low marks were due to late-submission penalties. Initially all high marks were downgraded (by 10% – the agreed maximum) by the tutor, but the number declined with subsequent assessments. Most assessors quoted from rubric as justification. Most peers agreed with self-assessments. Student feedback: good idea but implementation unsuccessful – 'once one person abuses the system, so will all others' (May show later introduction brings some cynicism).
Goldfinch	1994	Follow-up to trial in group work – peer-assessment in 2 stages, reporting on group tasks allocation, then performance. Administrative load of calculating a score based on involvement in group tasks and then another for performance far outweighed benefit of 2 scores: task-involvement score added little discrimination, changed few marks. Point of interest – if peer-assessment alone is used, overly generous markers will lose out (if rest of group give average marks, and generous marker gives all above average marks, then generous marker's average mark will lose out by the over generosity of their mark to everyone else. (Applies equally, but oppositely, to parsimonious markers). This is corrected by using self and peer marking together.
Stefani	1994	Studied correlation between peer, self and tutor marks and the benefits to students of self and peer-assessment. Found student assessment as reliable as tutor assessment; student motivation, and probably effort, very high. High tutor anxiety at relinquishing power.
Conway and Kember	1993	Two-stage process similar to and derived from Goldfinch's earlier work. Unnecessarily complex, with little to commend 1st stage (tasks performed versus tasks available), including complete lack of correlation with estimate of contribution in 2nd stage. Re-ran trial with simplified one-stage peer-assessment – weighting factor calculated from individual effort score versus group average effort score. Comment on difficulty in objectively assessing effort, but subjective view was this gave fair assessment. Final assessment in both cases was based on lecturer's and peer-assessment of project (presentation) adjusted by individual weighting factor. Seen as fair, more objective than traditional assessment.
Williams	1992	Studied student attitudes following a self- and peer-assessment by 99 undergraduates: assessment seemed to promote deep learning; students prefer ownership, and self and peer-assessment; students want 'expert' as final arbitrator; dislike criticism of peers, arbitrariness of marks; see need for training.
Jordan	1990	University ethnography module: 60% tutor assessed, 40% from two self- and peer-assessed exercises. Learning objectives: practice in objective assessment, and relevance of self-observation to ethnography. Evaluated by assessing process: self-assessment followed by peer-assessment, followed by moderation in class tutorial. Second exercise had added requirement of rationale for both self and peer marks. Resulted in: enhanced awareness of expectations of learning outcomes; more collaborative learning; more participation; exercises challenged students more.

Source: Researcher

## **2.10 CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT – PEER- AND SELF-ASSESSMENT**

### *2.10.1 PRIMARY EDUCATION*

The green shoots of P&SA are beginning to make an impression. Teachers in Irish primary schools are being encouraged by the NCCA through its teachers' information periodical *info@ncca* (2008) to view self-assessment as an aid to promote pupil learning, which is envisaged to be appropriate to all primary learners even from their first days in school. One recommended way of allowing this is through the use of rubrics. These would provide criteria for learning outcomes for the young learners, and allow them to visualise the differing levels of success in their particular learning tasks, providing support structures for practice in reflection and the skills of judgement and evaluation.

### *2.10.2 SECONDARY EDUCATION – JUNIOR CYCLE*

In the words of the NCCA (2010) progressing from primary to second-level school marks a transition not only in life (puberty), but in learning, and 'once that bridge is crossed, the students find that they encounter the most rigid of curriculum structures, and the most traditional of subject-based learning' (p 9). It would not be unreasonable to say that this experience is not too dissimilar to the one experienced by students when they were in primary school education.

With no fixed plan, but with an outlined vision, of what the future Junior Cycle might look like, the NCCA reports that, as it stands, the Junior Certificate 'acts as a preparation for the rigours of the Leaving Certificate examination' (p 28) and is causing many of the 55,000 students who experience it to withdraw from the learning experience. This is put down to the pursuit of knowledge to achieve grades above all else making itself apparent to both Junior and Senior Cycle students. Relevant to this

study the future Junior Cycle is envisaged to conceivably embrace P&SA (under the Assessment for Learning, formative assessment, strategy) as a tool for learning in a discussion on possible future directions of educational development. The NCCA outline their rationality for this in their discussion document under the heading of ‘Pathway 5: From generating an examination grade towards generating evidence of learning’ (p37), where it calls for the relocation of the responsibility for gathering the evidence of learning from external examiners back into the schools, to teachers *and learners*. It contends that ‘Assessment for Learning’ (p 60) is a learning tool which can permit:

- o teachers and learners to have common goals;
- o facilitation of students in recognising and achieving own goals;
- o engagement of learners in the assessment process;
- o incorporation of feedback to allow students to identify and correct disparities in own information and understanding;
- o students to be imbued with a belief in own ability to improve; and
- o teachers to incorporate assessment outcomes in future teaching

The NCCA assert that a principal aspect of drawing on this form of assessment as a learning tool is that it could embrace P&SA, which they view could result in greater learner responsibility, learner engagement and learner self-direction. That these benefits of P&SA have been known and have been debated for many years goes without question (Brown, 1990; Williams, 1992; Stefani, 1994; Brown *et al*, 1998; Sivan, 2000; Boud, 2000; Ballantyne *et al*, 2002; Somervell, 2003 and Kirby and Downs, 2007), but what has to be asked is the age old question ‘why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by a passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still so entrenched in practice?’ (Dewey, 1916: 38). A possible reason for the slow

inroad of methodologies such as P&SA into the curriculum is evidenced by Fautley and Savage (2008: 51) as they provide the following definition of P&SA while placing it into a classroom context:

peer-assessment involves students assessing the work of other students, their peers; while self-assessment involves each individual in a consideration of their own work . . . trainee and beginning teachers sometimes have problems with the notions and practices of peer and self-assessment when used with school students. In addition, many established practitioners also struggle with this, so do not worry if you see very little evidence of it in your school placements, this does not mean it is not a worthwhile thing to do.

Continuing to expound the worthiness of P&SA, they report the findings of one particular self-assessment study (Black and Wiliam, 1998), which suggests that the student group involved in ‘thinking about learning objectives and assessment criteria showed a statistically significant difference, where the mean gain made by the group concerned was almost twice that of the control group’. They carry on to say that, although this would be a striking achievement to emulate in the classroom, the advice they provide for the novice or trainee teacher is that ‘peer and self-assessment are not easily transferable into your lessons’ (p 51). That said, they highlight the numerous benefits of P&SA, including:

- o teacher saves time;
- o allows assessment of the learning process, otherwise not normally as available to the teacher;
- o negotiating the setting of criteria can help build, or at least underline, learning goals;
- o assessing own work facilitates reflection, a key educational and life skill;
- o fosters learner empowerment and autonomy;
- o reflective practice developed through self-assessment facilitates the development of professional competences.



Biggs (1999: 6) helps illustrate the deeper significance of the last point by stating, 'reflection in professional practice . . . , gives back not what is, but what might be, an improvement on the original'. In addition to bringing about an improvement on the original in the short-term, in the long-term it can forge newer shapes of innovation as each successive original builds on the previous one.

### 2.10.3 SECONDARY EDUCATION – SENIOR CYCLE

A vision for the future for senior cycle learning is depicted by the NCCA (2009) in their document *Towards Learning: An Overview of Senior Cycle Education*, which they suggest embodies an overview of education as (p3) 'essentially an act of hope, of optimism and of belief in the potential of each generation of learners to face and master the challenges of the future'. Reviewing senior secondary learners' assessment, the document sets out that the future learner will secure more involvement in setting the framework for their own formative assessment, including self-assessment. This involvement will, they claim, help learners develop their capabilities and attitudes towards learning management, and it will also stimulate engagement and discussion on progress with the teacher. They propose to align the assessment, learning outcomes and curriculum more closely, and include in the syllabus a rubric, showing broadly what is expected of the learner in the assessment for different levels of success. However, it is projected that 'formal assessment, as used to test and certify achievement, will continue to be conducted by the State Examinations Commission' (p 28). In this vision of senior secondary education, peer-assessment does not appear to be mentioned, despite the attention both self- and peer-assessment receive in the article *Assessment for Learning* in the NCCA's information bulletin for teachers, *info@ncca* (2005). On the other hand, there is provision for self-assessment and 'peer-reflection', which is believed to encourage learners to become more accountable for their own learning. In common

with the Junior Cycle, this is part of the formative assessment strategy ‘Assessment for Learning’ (NCCA, 2005: 27).

#### *2.10.4 FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION*

The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) (2006) was set up in Ireland by an Act of the Oireachtas in 2001 as the sole accreditation authority for all further education and training undertaken in the Irish state; further education is that which is assessed at levels one to six of the National Framework of Qualifications of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). Under its Quality Assuring Assessment: Policy document, sanctioned in 2005, FETAC stipulates that learners are obliged to follow the necessary process for their assessment and that their work will be ‘marked by an appropriate person (e.g. instructor/teacher)’ who is obliged ‘to judge and record the learner’s evidence and to make recommendations as appropriate’ (p 18). There appears to be no provision for student involvement in the assessment process currently. This is reflected in their policy on Making Assessment Decisions, which requires assessors to be ‘suitably qualified’, having either qualifications or experience relevant to the subject(s) of the assessment. There is no indication offered to suggest this policy will be reviewed in the near future. This is not to say that at a local level P&SA is not used, but in my experience, both as a teacher and as a researcher, there was no evidence of it in further education.

The regulation of assessment in higher education, because of its history, involves numerous authorities. The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) has published a policy document on Assessment and Standards (HETAC, 2009), which enumerates these bodies:

- Quality assurance standards are informed by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.
- The legal status of qualifications in Ireland is covered by the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999.
- Assessment standards are set nationally by the National Framework of Qualifications.
- Assessment design and implementation are recognised as the domain of the education provider.

The document underpins the importance of assessment (including summative assessment) for learning, recognising that students plan their learning tactics according to the assessment, and the possibility that this may lead to shallow learning. They encourage assessments which are ‘valid, reliable and authentic’, asserting that ‘valid summative assessment will differentiate true learning from the superficial appearances of learning and it will not reward poor learning strategies’ (p 11). Discussing P&SA, HETAC state that this assessment method may be employed, acknowledging that, providing it ‘would not lead to any conflicts of interest’, involving the learner in designing the assessment can help ‘develop learning-to-learn competence’ (p 11).

Although P&SA are recorded in NCCA documents, there is little evidence in my experience of its formal adoption. For example, as mentioned in Chapter, 1, Section 1.4.2, none of the teachers participating in this study had experience of P&SA. The primary school teacher participating in this study did refer to the informal use of self-assessment as a normal part of good teaching practice; this may have been the case with other teachers, but it was not mentioned, save as already noted, by the teachers in higher education who are employing P&SA.

## 2.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter, in exploring P&SA, has not set out to argue a case for the abolition of traditional forms of assessment, (including summative assessment). In the first place, the length of time it has taken to perfect these practices has not only led to the honing of a tool for the measurement of learning outcomes, it has also led to the honing of the system which underpins it. In the second place, it would be foolhardy to foresee any radical reform in educational assessment policy and practice occurring without meeting some resistance. Morgan (1993: 42) highlights an inherent difficulty in seeking change at any organisational level, by arguing,

the person who seeks to create change by directly undermining existing policies and structures often runs into trouble. Create a hole in bureaucratic functioning one week, and chances are that next week the basic structure will be twice as strong as before.

More realistically, and with a mind to the wide-ranging ramifications of the effects of all types of assessment in society, a case has been presented through this review of the literature for the adoption of a supplementary form of assessment. This should be an assessment method which can both add to learning and inform the public, summative assessments which have marked life transition points and directed career (and life) progression for generations. It should also be a more innovative, holistic form of assessment practice, which can support the *self* and provide for sustainable lifelong learning.

Students inside and outside the school walls live in a world where they are bombarded with societal standards, including academic, which need reaching to realise their true *value*. True value is not to be confused with true potential. The student's true value is complete in the learner's *self*. True potential is the natural inherent talent which the learner's education should serve to liberate. To be considered fit-for-purpose,

assessment must serve to this basic demand. James and Brown (2005: 18) suggest ‘a familiar saying is that unless we assess what we value we come only to value what we assess’. It is imperative that students are given the clear message by teachers that the former takes precedence over the latter.

Within the context of systemic thinking, this chapter has examined assessment in relation to its history, its existing impact on the learner; and its impact on learners’ ability to think for and direct self. Also investigated is a situation whereby, although many students may gain academic success from the current traditional practice of assessment, all learners appear to be at increasing risk of psychological distress, documenting the exacerbation of that risk by peer-pressure, and reasoning how P&SA can begin to address this issue.

The chapter also depicts a societal tolerance of a system of assessment which causes some learners great discomfort without redress; a system which is so ingrained that it provides adolescents with a rite of passage to adulthood. It provides a report from one prominent Irish businessman who discusses recruitment practice in Ireland, which illustrates how examination results are being employed by employers to select candidates. Highlighting how this process of selecting employees is disadvantaging students who are already suffering from disadvantaged backgrounds, he puts forward a vision for a more equitable model of educational practice.

New provisions of the Irish curriculum, and intended developments, in relation to assessment are considered. The slow assimilation of the language of P&SA is noted, but the practice, as called for in this study, is notably absent below tertiary level. There is no doubt that many changes have been made in education, and the rate of change is higher than ever before (NCCA, 2002). However, they point out the paradoxical

reaction to the changes: despite the rate of change, more change is demanded; despite benefits from the changes, there is growing resistance from educational personnel to more changes; despite being forward looking, personnel lament the passing of the way things were.

The teacher's role is also revisited from the viewpoint of the centrality of the teacher in education, together with the difficulty in adapting to the calls for change in different directions. Key aspects are the dichotomy between the traditional role of teacher in *authority* in learning and the more sustainable view of teacher as a partner providing *guidance*.

There is a long history of P&SA pioneers, from at least as early as George Jardine in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to current stalwarts, which include David Boud, Sally Brown, Nancy Falchikov, and Judy Goldfinch. There are many other proponents who have employed P&SA (see Table 2.6 for illustrative examples), but it appears that any organised move towards the formal adoption of P&SA is slow to materialise. In the absence of a formalised framework underpinning a global model of P&SA, the practice of this assessment tends to take a malleable form, which is dependent on the context, the learners and the individual researcher.

Outcomes of P&SA implementations as reported by users and observers of the method are described, with the skills, attitudes, and competences which are noted to be developed through this practice of assessment. A description of the outcomes which facilitate the learner in developing skills, attitudes and behaviour founded on self-reliance in learning. Such learning is transferable and centred on life skills or meta-learning (or learning to learn), which are required throughout lifelong learning.

'Learning to learn' is among the eight key competences identified by the European

Commission (2007: 3) which ‘all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment’ (the other key competences are: communication in the mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; digital competence; social and civic competences; sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and cultural awareness and expression).

The summary of work carried out in the area of P&SA in Table 2.6 provides an indication of the broad range of contexts in which this assessment technique can be applied. In addition, the areas which require more research, particularly a co-ordinated, wide study, are identified. That this assessment method can be applied so readily to so many contexts without major problems is testimony to its universal application – what is needed now is more practice of P&SA by teachers and policy makers.

Finally, there is evidence to suggest that what we say and how we as educators communicate with learners in relation to assessment has the potential to impede or assist the development of human capital. New ways of thinking are necessary to break into newer modes of *thought*, which will allow individuals, from a young age, greater freedom to move into areas where they can exert influence and have a hand in shaping their future. The measure of assessment rests in its capacity to optimise human capital. This is distinct from a criterion which seeks to measure how an individual performs. When the latter parallels the former its worth is validated. If the latter opposes the former its worth is nullified. For example, unless the higher stipulation of developing human potential is the overarching goal, assessment always remains tied to the short-term goal of measuring how the learner performs, usually in an artificially contrived, short-term test: when understood in these terms, the observed effect of conventional assessment to promote shallow learning can easily be understood.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*Any scientific inquiry, which is made on the level of human encounter, involves the inquirer in an interpersonal exchange. The inquirer has to gain the confidence of the community with which she works. The centres of human existence can be reached only if there is common trust that the encounter takes place for the benefit of people included. This means there is in last resort no mere observer position in such an encounter, there is common search for common good.*

Swantz, 1970: 359-60

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The practicality of conducting research with more than one group of participants is argued by Horan (2009:31) to be more challenging to a researcher because of the multifaceted perspectives. He suggests identifying one particular group will help ensure ‘the literature that the researcher considers will begin to take on a unified form’. While there was more than one ‘set’ of participant, and they fell into more than one category, they were unified as a group. The unifying factors were their need to learn, their perceived dependency on the teacher and, as noted in the review of the literature, their need for affirmative relationships within the educational environment.

The challenge of selecting an appropriate research methodology was quite a complex process. A qualitative, or at least semi-qualitative, approach was required which could address the research question, while at the same time being resourceful and flexible enough to serve different groups of participants, with groups and individuals having diverse perspectives. There are many definitions of qualitative research, but Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 3) best explain why the study was located within a qualitative construct when they argue:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs,



recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

The research methodology evolved as the research progressed. However, this evolution was not accidental. The same fundamental thinking which guided the methodological choice in the initial study remained constant throughout the life of the research. The underpinning principles of the initial study design were to work with students in their assessment, giving the students a voice in both the design and carrying out of the assessment. The aim was to have students participate, as partners in the assessment process. These principles required a participatory, collaborative and emancipatory research approach. In this context, AR with its collaborative and participatory nature, from the critical theoretic or emancipatory paradigm, was chosen for the initial phases (Lewin, 1948; McNiff *et al*, 1992; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996; Wadsworth, 1998; Cook, 2000; McNiff and Whitehead, 2002).

This approach helped to facilitate participant ownership and satisfied the partnership approach, as well as allowing me to improve my practice at an organisational level. However, although AR satisfied the basic principles and has much to offer, it did not appear to go far enough in satisfying the requirements for academic rigor throughout the research process. For example, as the teacher, my vested interest in obtaining an overly positive research outcome might have inadvertently surfaced when carrying out an investigation on my own practice. As might be expected in AR, collecting, analysing data, and presenting findings and recommendations cast me in a primary role, inseparable from both the research and participants. Such circumstances can make it challenging for the researcher to remain faithful to objectivity. Locke *et al* (2000: 25) point to the plight of the human predicament when they claim ‘there is no reason to believe that researchers are paragons of virtue. Nor should we expect that by some

magic of nature or nurture they have been exempted from the human frailties of temptation'. However, at the risk of stating the obvious, they emphasise that to be other than truthful contaminates both research and research outcomes: by default that would diminish all, including the researcher.

In pursuit of improving both objectivity and transparency in the research process, a way of bolstering the rigor was sought. A Grounded Theory (GT) approach to the data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) had appeared to marry well with the AR in the initial study. The import of adding a strategy (or strategies) from one particular methodology to another, core methodology is described as a '*mixed methods design*' by Morse (2003: 190). For the purposes of this report, Morse's description of mixed methods is used as opposed to the narrower view which considers mixed methods to wed qualitative and quantitative methodologies as discussed in Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) and Creswell (2003). As the study progressed to Phase One of the current study, the methodologies were re-evaluated. The AR technique continued to blend satisfactorily with the GT based analytical methods within the context of further research with my own students. However, AR is centred on improving own practice and as the focus of the research was broadened beyond this parameter to investigating the practice of others, it necessarily had to be reconsidered: AR was incompatible with the part of Phase Two, which was carried out with external teachers and their students. For the reasons described below, an Interpretative Phenomenological (IP) approach (Husserl, 1931) was considered compatible with the existing GT method. Both of these qualitative approaches appeared to complement each other well. These mixed methods were adopted and remained in place throughout the research study.

In this chapter, the development of these mixed method research methodologies, noted above, is described with the rationale for their adoption. This is in line with Bryant and

Charmaz (2007: 32) who assert ‘any research method makes epistemological claims; a method must indicate why its application will lead to a development of knowledge, otherwise researchers would have no basis for choosing it in the first place’. The chapter also outlines the implementation of the research cycles. The data gathering tools are identified and described together with a rationale for their selection.

To avoid stripping the current research from its context, the following descriptions will include a brief outline of the methodology employed during the initial phase of the research from which Phase One, and later Phase Two, of the study evolved.

### **3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM**

Research paradigms are philosophical and fluid in nature; they alter during the debate which naturally surrounds them. A paradigm is a basic philosophy – the foundation of principles, convictions and suppositions – which directs the research, or whatever activity one is engaged in (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). Depending of your view, reality may be waiting for you to discover it, or may be created by your interacting with it – the ontological dimension. Likewise, in the epistemological dimension, knowledge may be there waiting to be revealed, or you may construct knowledge through interaction, transaction and consensus with others. A particular philosophy may lie anywhere in the space or continuum created by these two dimensions of ontology and epistemology – this defines a paradigm, which indicates the type of methodologies to be used to learn reality through building knowledge. Crowley-Henry (2009: 61) gives a clear indication of the usage of such terms in research: for example, ‘based on the researcher’s particular ontology and epistemology he/she will be guided to follow a methodology that he/she believes best informs knowledge [Epistemology] in order to make sense of reality [Ontology]’. Holding a view that reality and truth are socially constructed and

knowledge of these truths is constructed and interpreted through experience, interactions and transactions and with others positioned my outlook on this continuum, characterising my own working paradigm. This understanding shaped the choice of methodologies used in this research. This resonates with Zuber-Skerritt's (2001: 4) claim that ultimately 'it is the inquirer's philosophical assumptions that mainly determine which methods s/he will choose, especially when the inquirer is conscious of his or her epistemological framework'.

I have provided simplified descriptions of some of the paradigms used to describe the epistemology and ontology of research methods, for clarity, in Table 3.1. These loosely follow the ideas of authors such as Lincoln and Guba (1989), Zuber-Skerritt (1996, 2001), Mertens (1998), Trochim (2000), Patton (2002), McNiff and Whitehead (2002), Denzin and Lincoln (2003), Moran and Mooney (2002), and Krauss (2005).

**Table 3.1:** Research paradigms

Paradigms	Positivist	Postpositivist/Phenomenological/Interpretive			
		Postpositivist	Interpretive	Critical theoretic/emancipatory	Pragmatic/emergent
Knowledge	<i>Knowledge is (potentially) absolute</i>	<i>Knowledge is uncertain</i>			
Process	Investigation empirical, objective Values independent of facts	Knowledge is flawed Investigation empirical; objectivity the aim	Knowledge is constructed, contextual Investigation discursive	Knowledge and values are shared, grounded in society	Knowledge emerges from data
Examples	Classical, objective, scientific research	Objectivist research, modified to account for intangibles, (for instance subjectivity)	Interpretative phenomenology		
			Grounded theory . . .		. . . grounded theory
			Action research		

Source: Researcher

As the research was predominantly concerned with individuals and their cognition and experience, which were unchanging features of the investigation, the methods chosen were from the postpositivist/phenomenological/interpretive family. Noted previously, the initial stage of the study drew on AR from the emancipatory paradigm and a GT method which was both interpretative and pragmatic in nature. Concerned with experience, IP analysis emerged from the interpretive paradigm. Throughout all of this study, the quantitative element added a positivist dimension which was a constant aspect in the initial, Phase One and Phase two studies, strengthening the research, which is in line with Charmaz (2006: 127) who suggests 'interpretive theories are often juxtaposed against positivist theories'.

### **3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The findings from the initial study appeared to show a comprehensive effect on student motivation of using P&SA. To confirm this finding the research methodology needed to follow the semi-quantitative approach for Phase One. It began to appear from the qualitative findings (mainly observation) at the beginning of Phase One that there could be a positive effect on students' self-reliance and their sense of self-direction. To explore these emergent effects specific quantitative tools were tested, retaining the quantitative facet of the studies through to the end.

The research methodology, which began as a relatively clear cut choice in the initial study, proved more complex with the advancement of the study phases. As the primary focus of the initial study had at its core an intention to improve practice, AR was a natural choice of methodology. Although augmented during Phase One with a GT method to aid in the maintenance of transparent objectivity, a further element was sought which would allow focus, in particular, on the common, shared and lived

*assessment experience* (the *phenomenon*). For this reason IP analysis was considered appropriate. Smith *et al* (2009: 204, 21) chronicle the development of Phenomenology and the work of the major pioneers, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, and help clarify the reasons for reaching this decision by arguing this approach is centred on ‘concern with lived experience, hermeneutic inquiry, [and] idiographic focus’ (p 204), and also explaining that, ‘in IPA [IP analysis] research, our attempts to understand other people’s relationship to the world are necessarily *interpretative*, and will focus upon their attempts to make *meanings* out of their activities and to the things happening to them’ (p 21). Although the experience of assessment is common to all research participants, including my own experience of assessment as a student, we are all unique individuals complete with all that entails, including our perceptions and how we interpret reality and our experience within that reality. Causing an individual to *stop to question/analyse* an experience sharpens the senses to that experience. It can also deepen the level of self-awareness and induce a greater degree of reflection and reflexivity. The range of levels (of significance) of experiences is represented by Smith *et al* (2009) as a range of levels of conscious attention called for by those experiences – this is illustrated in Table 3.2. They suggest that in most of life experiences, most individuals deal with experiences at levels one to three. Phenomenological (or other) research, with a focus group or individual interview, will cause a level four reflection. They caution that the researcher must bear in mind that, as well as interpreting her own level four reflections on the narrative, the experience, as significant as it may be to the participant with this level of reflection, would probably have had no more effect than a level three reflection at most had there been no post-experience questioning: a process they term a ‘double hermeneutic’ (p 190).

**Table 3.2:** Levels of conscious attention

Consciousness level of experience	Descriptor per Smith <i>et al</i> (2009)	Description of level
1. Unconscious reflex	Pre-reflective reflexivity	Unconscious awareness, where the experience does not register consciously but is perceived and reacted to by reflex without stimulating reflection
2. Conscious reflex	Reflective “glancing-at” a pre-reflective experience	Minimal conscious awareness, where the experience may register in passing but does not stimulate reflection
3. Spontaneous conscious reflection	Attentive reflection on the pre-reflective	Experience obtrudes on consciousness causing casual reflection
4. Reflective deliberation	Deliberate controlled reflection	Experience registers significance causing deliberate later recall and analysis

Source: Researcher, adapted in part from Smith *et al* (2009: 189)

It is beyond the scope of this work to expound on AR, GT and IP in their entirety: these qualitative research approaches are well subscribed to and are depicted widely in the work of many writers, including, Stern (2009), Bowen (2006), Scott and Howell (2008), Tan *et al* (2009), Ueda and Sakugawa (2009), Brown (2004) and Newton and Burgess (2008). However, it is important to take time here to examine some of the merits of each method and how they were integrated, making an appropriate mixed method research methodology. It is understood that my interpretation of what constitutes an appropriate mixed method in this particular context is but one interpretation, which may not necessarily sit well with another researcher’s interpretation.

In stating this, it has to be borne in mind that ‘there is no such thing as the correct method or even the best method for addressing a particular research interest or question’ (Brown and Dowling, 1998: 8). Furthermore, Ison (2008: 156), writing about systems theory and, in particular, systems methods (an understanding of which he equates to understanding the people in the network that constitutes the system) points out that,

as you experience the use of a particular systems method and strive to make it a methodology, it is important to . . . judge it in relation to your practice of it. It will be your experience of using an approach in a situation to which it fits that matters.

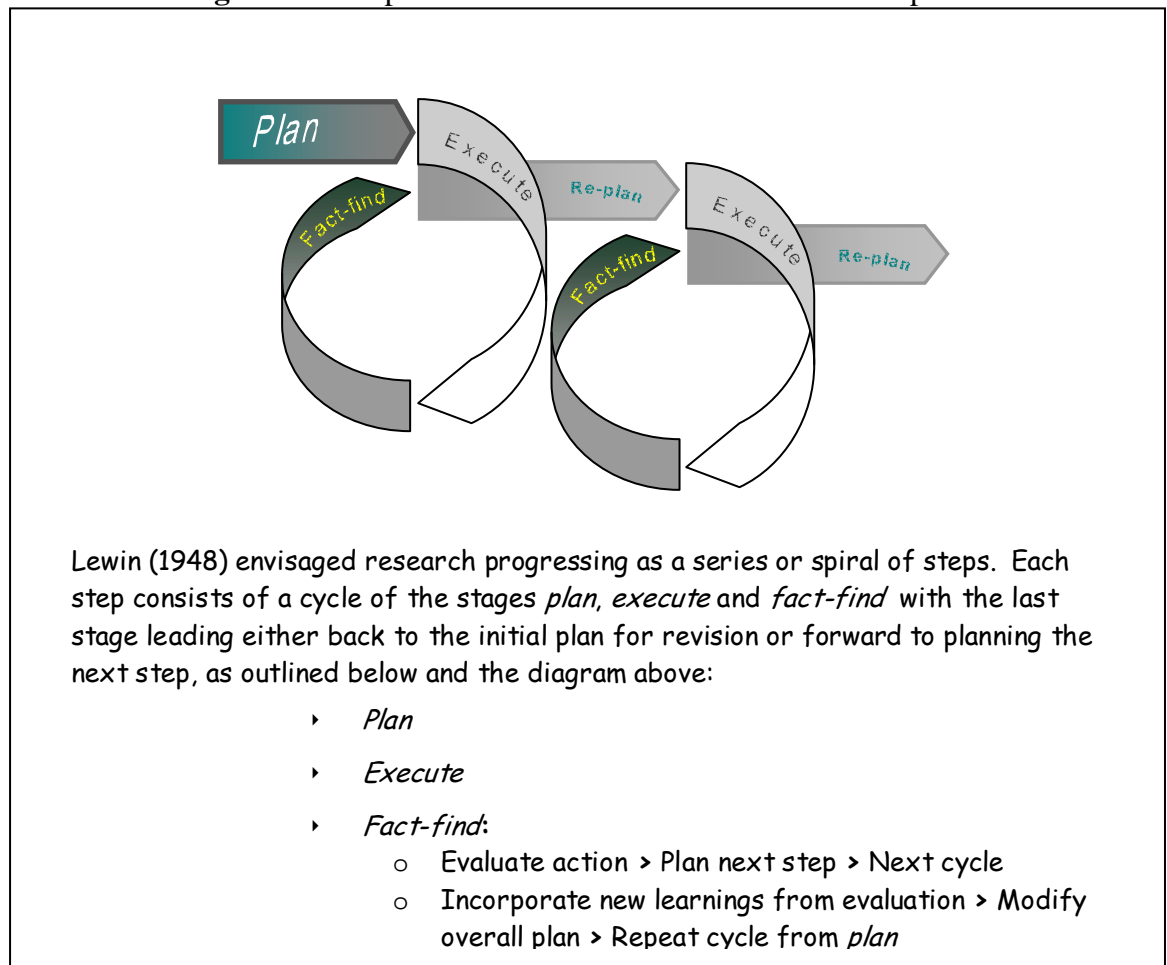
These points are underscored by Corbin (2008: ix) as she, in confessing to being taken off guard by the ‘Qualitative Revolution’ and the ‘Postmodern Movement’ since earlier revisions of her work with Strauss, writes about ‘dropping a lot of the [earlier] dogma, flexing some of the procedures, and even thinking about how computers might enhance the research process’. Despite the passage of time since the earlier revision of the writing (the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition was published in 1998 and the 3<sup>rd</sup> in 2008), and the acceptance of the ascendancy of a new paradigm (Postmodernism), she makes the point that, in carrying out qualitative research, it is the researcher who must have a feeling for what is needed and it is up to her/him to utilise the best available tools in securing that end.

### *3.3.1 ACTION RESEARCH*

Action research has its origins in the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. Lewin was a proponent of action with little faith in research that produced little else but scholastic, intellectual writing. His model, outlined in Figure 3.1. is prescriptive and practical: as the research objective is reviewed and refined at the end of each cycle, the research proceeds in a spiral, or a series of steps. Each step is comprised of a cycle of planning, execution and fact-finding (Lewin, 1948:145-146).



**Figure 3.1:** Representation of Lewin's action research spiral



Source: Researcher, adapted from Lewin, 1948)

Lewin's work remains current and is widely availed of, with evidence of refinement in some cases. For example, Cohen *et al* (2000) portray an adaptation of Lewin's model, depicting a cycle of Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect. At a later stage Lomax (2002: 123) describes AR similarly as 'a cyclical activity where you make a plan, carry it through, monitor what goes on, reflect on events critically (using the monitoring data) and move forward'. Reflection has become part of today's action researcher's vocabulary. Reid and Frisby (2008) suggest AR is an approach which has facilitated social change because of its concentration on bringing emancipation and inclusivity into the practice of research, contributing equity to the process.

As the initial study was instigated to improve practice and empower the learner, the limelight obviously fell on AR as a suitable methodology. With the aim of the research to facilitate the development of students as independent thinking individuals who can work interdependently to contribute to society, capable of being agents of change, AR provided a natural platform.

Allowing reflection-*in*-action and -*on*-action (Schön, 1983) into own practice, and in a wider context, partnership with others made this research style appropriate. Justifying her own practice, Higgins (2000: 131) explains simply why this approach can make itself a preferred route in professional practice as she says, ‘given the importance of exploring the problem in the natural context and allowing interpretations and explanations to come from the people involved as opposed to a prior theory or hypothesis, action research seemed the most appropriate’, sentiments which capture also the essence of both ethnographic and grounded theory research.

The capacity of AR to help in addressing the areas of inclusion and empowerment is a linchpin of the study. This is subtly brought to the fore by Pedler and Burgoyne (2008: 322) who argue that AR can be considered ‘a reaction against detached research generating abstract knowledge which is then disseminated through teaching from a position of assumed expertise’. They continue identifying characteristics which made AR appear relevant to my study as they suggest it is an approach which can support the search for ways to solve societal issues constructively and pragmatically. In an equally subtle way Levin and Greenwood (2008: 218) highlight how AR can make it possible to tackle issues of empowerment *versus* power wielded by ‘authority’ when they state, ‘the action researcher professional is fully present in the field situation, not hiding behind a purposely distanced “expert” role’. As the purpose of the research was to facilitate such empowerment, with greater student input into their assessment process, the research

methodology was obligated to ensure student input into the research process in a similar way. This concept also reflects the equity of esteem called for by Freire (1992, 1996).

The connection between Lewin, AR and Freire is made clearly by Reason and Bradbury (2008: 3), who at the same time as tracing the development of AR to Lewin, expound historically on how thinking in that era was typified by Freire's work on liberation pedagogy. They assert that the basis for qualitative studies was formed from his thinking, 'liberal humanism', together with other philosophies, such as 'pragmatism, phenomenology, critical theory, systemic thinking and social construction'. AR is informed and has been shaped by these philosophies. This heritage, which made AR such an obvious approach to draw on, also provided path options for the later progress of this study.

As a further requirement of the study was to ensure validity of the study findings and conclusions, it was necessary to seek validation measures which would be congruent with and applicable to a postpositivist, interpretative and constructivist investigation (which underpin not only components of AR, but also those of GT and IP). Guba and Lincoln (2005: 207) detail 'authenticity criteria' which they believe bear the stamp of 'authentic, trustworthy, rigorous, or "valid" constructivist or phenomenological inquiry'. They argue the criteria, outlined in Table 3.3, can act as a benchmark to test both inquiry process and outcomes of this particular type of investigation. Believing it is the catalytic and tactical authenticity which reflects elements of 'critical theorist action, action research, or participative or co-operative inquiry', they claim that it is within these forms that individual and collective abilities can be enhanced to enable research participants become 'emancipatory' activists in their communities.

**Table 3.3:** Validation – constructivist study

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
1 Fairness	There must be clear representation of participant voices in all writings. Their accounts must be treated in a balanced and fair manner (fairness should actively discriminate in favour of inclusive practice).
2 Ontological and educative authenticity	The inquiry must raise awareness, not only in the immediate research participant, but also in persons who are socially and organisationally associated with the participant for any reason
3 Catalytic and tactical authenticities	The research investigation should engender (a) concrete pursuits by the research participant and (b) researcher input, if called for, to train participants in skills which allow them to pursue and accomplish identified actions.

Source: Researcher, adapted from Guba and Lincoln (2005: 207)

Using the validation model above in Table 3.3 as a basis for reference, it is possible to determine whether the research study falls within such boundaries.

In line with the first criterion, the study actively sought, both within the assessment and research processes, to treat participants in a respectful, open and inclusive way. The research process actively sought participant input, reporting on and considering during analysis all stakeholder voices, whether the data were collected through interview, focus group, informal discussion or observation. This allowed the seeking out of not only those views which were positive about the study, but especially any negative or critical views, ensuring fairness was visibly included as a consideration in the research, satisfying the first criterion.

Considering the second criterion, the coursework was altered to contain all the necessary details of the P&SA to be carried out, along with the aims and objectives of the research, with time allocated for class discussion, providing each participant with an increased awareness of the effects of her/him having an input into the assessment

process. Although raising secondary awareness was not actively planned, it became obvious as some of the participants (students of education employed in part-time teaching or training roles) reported the effects of P&SA in their own practices, that they were raising their own students' awareness, fulfilling the requirements of this criterion.

In line with the third criterion, participants' voices were listened to throughout, acted upon and are reported out in the thesis. In addition, the subject of the dissertation surrounded and was built on emancipatory intent. It had as its focus the aim of equipping and empowering learners to act as agents of change, furthering self-belief in self to *act* as an agent of personal and community change and improvement.

Also relevant to validity is the position of self as researcher and administrator of the investigation. Patton (2002: 14) looks at measuring the validity of quantitative and qualitative research. He argues that with the former, a measuring instrument is used to produce findings, using an exact, specific standard to compare with in an exact, standardised method. He suggests consideration is exclusively paid to the specific measuring instrument and its implementation. In the latter case, however, he points out that 'the researcher is the instrument' and that the reliability of this form of investigation, relies to a considerable degree, on her/his 'skill, competence, and rigor' in doing the work.

As described above and mentioned earlier, the action researcher becomes part of the research and as such becomes a central figure in determining research outcomes. The researcher who is experienced in the topic under review and into the practice and culture of the stakeholders has the benefit of insight (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). However, while insight may be advantage, it does not address the issue of ensuring the research is conducted within a value framework. It was just as important to ensure a

morally correct code of practice as it was to select and maintain an effective research methodology. Both affect the validity of the research outcomes. For instance, I may consider transparency, collaboration, openness and truth as personal values, but upholding them in practice is another matter.

Addressing the issue of values during the initial study raised awareness of Whitehead's (2000) *Living Educational Theories* and the 'Living I' of McNiff and Whitehead (2002: 22). Their work is made relevant to this study because it emphasises the need for ensuring congruence between researcher thinking and action. It is interesting to note that Whitehead (2009: 176) believes his need to improve practice is cemented in his 'passion to see values of freedom, justice, compassion, respect for persons, love and democracy lived as fully as possible'. Although aimed at improving practice, which is primarily considered to be within the scope of AR, his motivating values could just as well be envisaged as a set of principles for an ethical framework within any research context. It is also interesting to note his appreciation of the work of, among others, Erich Fromm (relevant to this study as shown in Chapter 1) who influenced his thinking in building his *Living Educational Theory*, and who contributed to my understanding of the functioning and development of the *self*. Assuming a systematic self-evaluation supported my personal code of conduct, underpinning self and practice. This helped ensure my personal values were observable in both inquiry processes and outcomes. Dewey (1916: 358) emphasises that this is an essential standpoint by advocating that 'the moral and the social quality of conduct are, in the last analysis, identical with each other'.

The question of validity and insight also borrows from ethnographic methodologies, where a core principle of the researcher understanding a culture is the total immersion of the researcher in the culture of the research participants. In this case, the culture is

that of a learner in an educational establishment: as a product of such an establishment, having undergone the phenomenon being studied (assessment), I found myself uniquely in such a fully immersed, empathetic position. This added another point of view against which to measure the validity of the research.

Kemmis (2008: 123) makes it clear that AR in the future will rest on its capacity to deal with, or work within and across, the boundaries between people (whether individuals or groups) and organisations (the state, public bodies, institutions), and to act within and across these social interfaces. This leads him to believe AR has to evolve: it must,

find a way to work not just on the self-realization of persons or the realization of more rational and coherent organizations, but in the interstices between people and organizations, and across the boundaries between lifeworlds and systems.

These concepts would form an ideal in my context. I was a part of an organisation – an educational institution – conducting AR with individuals as the participants. However, it did not easily translate across the boundary; there are no procedures for the organisation and participants to have simultaneous voices, so there is no discourse between them. As a result, advances produced through AR are necessarily only applicable to the researcher.

Although AR did not adapt to crossing boundaries, I needed a method to perform similar research in other organisations with external stakeholders, to carry out what is termed theoretical sampling in GT (carrying out the same endeavour with other participant groups within other contexts). However, as it stood, AR did offer the advantage of providing an appropriate framework which allowed a planned and structured approach to the action component.

Another notable potential drawback was that AR did not appear to safeguard sufficiently against researcher subjectivity. Marshall and Rossman (2006: 30) puts this

concern into perspective when they argue that a ‘qualitative researcher’s challenge is to demonstrate that this personal interest – increasingly referred to as the researcher’s *positionality* [their emphasis] – will not bias the study’. In order to temper any subjective preconceptions or bias, it was necessary to introduce an additional approach, one which would specifically offer a more stringent and rigorous management of data and analysis. Although the effect of subjectivity on findings was minimised due to similarities between my context and ethnographic methodology, which was looked at in more detail above, the rigor should be clearly visible. A GT method appeared to fulfil these conditions.

### 3.3.2 *GROUNDED THEORY*

It is Morse’s (2009) belief that the most frequently used qualitative research approach in the social science field is GT. She attributes this popularity to its capacity to integrate all of the data collected surrounding a particular experience or occurrence, allowing a theory which explains the effects of the phenomenon to grow naturally from that data. She also perceives this approach to have advantages in that GT is a generic method which is applicable throughout the social sciences and can transfer between similar phenomena in time or concept. For example, this method travelled across the full spectra of learner educational levels and types, ages, backgrounds. It also lent its strength to: (a) exploring the effects of introducing P&SA on external teachers and their students, and; (b) the continuing investigation of P&SA in my own practice, which made it compatible with my already in-house use of AR. This view concurs with Charmaz (2006: 9) who emphasises that ‘grounded theory methods can complement other approaches to qualitative data analysis, rather than stand in opposition to them’. There is also the convincing argument which justifies coupling AR with a GT approach made by Dick (2007: 403) who reasons these two particular methods are frequently



paired because ‘the action research is chosen for its support of action. . . .[and] grounded theory is assumed to provide rigor’.

These perspectives are unsurprising when GT is looked at in more detail. Corbin and Strauss (2008: 1) describe it as ‘a specific methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss . . . for the purpose of building theory from data’. Broadening the concept further Strauss and Corbin (1990: 23) suggest the theory obtained is ‘. . . inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents’. The principle characteristics of this methodology are outlined in Table 3.4.

**Table 3.4:** Characteristics of grounded theory

- Qualitative, standardised, methodical, flexible
- Constructivist analysis, consisting of overlapping, ongoing processes, ceasing only where additional data produces no significant alteration to the theory, consisting of:
  - data gathering* .....
  - ....> *concept building* .....
  - .....> *concept categorisation* .....
  - .....> *provisional high-level conceptualisation* .....
  - .....> *theory derivation*.....
  - .....> *provisional theory verification*.....
- Incorporates researcher’s knowledge, experience, insight
- Focus is on phenomena as lived by participants
- Transparent and open

Source: Researcher, adapted from: Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Corbin and Strauss (2008)

It is useful here to establish what is meant by the term ‘theory’. Definitions which relate well to this research context are provided by Sumser (2001: 74), ‘an attempt to explain or represent some aspect of reality’, and Dick (2007: 401), ‘an explicit model or set of statements which illuminate a situation by abstracting its key features’. These align with the intent of GT ‘to build theory that is faithful to and illuminates the area

under study' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 24). In common with Lewin's (1948) AR outlook, Strauss and Corbin stress that the *theory* should be usefully applied.

The building of a theory grounded in data, GT, is based on a process of abstracting concepts from data (Holton, 2007), the object of which is outlined by Glaser (2002: 30), who argues

the goal of GT is to arrive at . . . a core category which organizes the other categories by continually resolving the main concern . . . a substantive theory [which] can be generalized to . . . a formal theory, and even raised to a higher formal level of becoming in general, a theory of socialization. This is done by theoretical sampling and constant comparisons.

He explains that GT begins with the collection of data and, almost simultaneously, the abstraction of concepts or patterns of ideas from that data. By comparing the data as they are collected (without preconceptions), it is possible to recognise these patterns. These small *patterns* can then be grouped into larger patterns which bear the same or similar meanings, which he terms *concepts*. He suggests the same process is repeated as more data are obtained, (comparing new data with existing data, and comparing among concepts and categories at all levels of comparison) allowing similar concepts to be grouped into more general concepts, which he terms *categories*. He suggests this process continues to saturation point, when the addition of more data does not change the *concepts* or the *categories*. At this level of analysis, he claims, the *categories* which form the core concepts of the research are ordered into a logical pattern which forms the *theory*, which is thus grounded in the data. He explains that the process is not a linear one: in fact, a provisional theory may emerge from few data, concepts and categories, with many iterations before the provisional theory becomes stable and can be freed from the tentative, "provisional" label. In an attempt to pursue and remain in step with this, Glaser's (2002) process, all studies included in Phase One and Phase Two comprised the following procedure:

- ❑ All data were collected, and they were only read through for overall meaning once they had all been copied without preconceptions. (Being a skilled typist, this copying came naturally and made this procedure easier.)
- ❑ Because of the way I naturally read the data, after the first reading (to copy the data (transcribe it) into a readable format) had been done in a value-free manner, the second and subsequent readings were to gather the data into concept patterns. This identification of patterns in the data is referred to as coding, and an example of this step is provided in Appendix G, which displays a transcribed and coded interview in Table G.1. In practice, as described below, there were many iterations of coding and category grouping and sorting to draw out the final themes: this process has been abridged in the illustration provided in the appendix, but the coding and identified patterns of the thematic analysis (shown in Table G.2) in the example are accurate and representative.
- ❑ On the second reading, all concepts were gathered into categories, which almost always turned out to be, on subsequent readings and comparisons, sub-patterns as described by Glaser (2002).
- ❑ On subsequent readings those concepts were grouped into broader patterns until the data were all contained within concept categories, each of which contained just one core ‘image’. These were then combined in one explanatory, overarching concept – the emergent theory.
- ❑ Although the data collected from others was analysed carefully by constant comparison as described, one important difference here is that, as in ethnographic research, I as the researcher was completely immersed in the culture and was emotionally empathetic with the learners. Rather than focusing entirely on the goal of objectivity, virtually an impossible task, I tried to incorporate my own views and feelings as part of the data. Charmaz (2005: 510) helps clarify this point by explaining, ‘our theoretical analyses are interpretative renderings of a reality not objective reportings of it’.

This choice of methodology allowed the study to proceed through various cycles under different guises (changed participants, subjects, learner levels, ages and eventually teachers and educational venues) without deviating from the research purpose. This

made it an appropriate methodology to draw on throughout the study. It was the one constant that could be relied on to help provide a consistent and systematic way of working with all stakeholders, regardless of environment or context. The systematic manner of collecting, sorting, analysing and interpreting data encapsulated core features. This constancy throughout the process inhibited inconsistencies from arising between the different individual studies: all data were treated in the same methodical way. A major advantage to this was that it held all of the studies together and helped avoid any digression. This was important because reporting out on the research seldom captures the ups and downs of working with others to achieve a research aim. Another advantage was my own experience which Strauss and Corbin (1990:42) maintain provides a greater depth of comprehension, giving ‘theoretical sensitivity’, which:

refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn’t. All this is done in conceptual rather than concrete terms. It is theoretical sensitivity that allows one to develop a theory that is grounded, conceptually dense, and well integrated – and to do this more quickly than if this sensitivity were lacking.

A further advantage was that the fixed procedures of GT allowed a sharper delineation between subjectivity and objectivity to be navigated. Although, keeping in mind Charmaz’s (2005) earlier comment on objectivity, Guba and Lincoln (2005: 208) also underscore ‘objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imagination of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower’. Nevertheless, the practicality of adhering to GT’s systematic process provided the detached mindset necessary to ensure the obligatory rigor.

### *3.3.3 INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGY*

Focussing on the researcher while speaking about values, Wadsworth (1998) identifies two crucial factors which exert a considerable effect on shaping what the researcher

does, describing these factors as ‘the strength of our imagination’ so that theory-building is profound and creative, and ‘scepticism’, to maintain congruence between emergent theory and the practice under investigation. These concepts apply likewise in my context. In Phase One, the exercise of striving to at least recognise the standing of these concepts was implicit in the *reflection* element of the AR process. Phase Two, however, did not use an AR approach because the study had evolved to include researching with others in their practices.

In an attempt to retain a *reflective* component which would be discernible right through the research, a phenomenological approach, which ‘demands that intense reflection is an integral part of the process’ (Goulding 1999: 865), was substituted for AR. IP as a research method has as its core aim the exploration of an individual’s experience and the individual’s interpretation of that experience, an approach which von Eckartsberg (1994) describes as ‘focusing on acts and structures of consciousness elicited by narrative protocols and clarified by reflection’. Putting it another way, Moustakas (1994: 13) explains that ‘the empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience’. He clarifies that the main objective of a phenomenological approach is to ascertain what *meaning* individuals take from an experience (the phenomenon); by comprehensively breaking down the description of the phenomenon by each individual, the meaning of that phenomenon may be arrived at; by analysing the descriptions given by many individuals, the core, generalised meaning may be elicited. In describing Husserl’s (1931) ‘*epoché*’ (looking at an experience [phenomenon] free from preconceptions, key to phenomenology) and also in describing the aims of the phenomenological approach, Moustakas is highlighting the chief areas of relevance of IP to this study. Cohen *et al*

(2000: 7) join 'epoché' with 'bracketing', explaining Husserl 'used the mathematical metaphor of bracketing, meaning to bracket out one's prejudices and personal commitments, to understand meanings as they are for those describing the experiences'. It is important to note 'epoché' is also taken to be synonymous with 'bracketing' (Groenwald, 2004), as for many phenomenologists the two concepts may be transposed readily (Bednall, 2006).

While necessary, the 'bracketing' or epoché aspect of this approach is not an easy task, but insisting on a reflective scaffold, the 'bracketing' element lent a tangible benefit to the investigation. This benefit occurs as the intent of the bracketing itself was made more possible because of the reflective stipulation while at the same time the same stipulation ensured the entire study remained ensconced within a reflexive framework. For example, in line with philosophical thinking surrounding the understanding of the *self* (Fromm, 1942), my socialisation and education permeated the research. This involves becoming consciously aware of unconscious influences brought about by my learned habits, educationally, socially or both, including during the gathering, handling and analysis of the information. Unless I acknowledged and took steps to guard against these influences I would have involuntarily *projected onto* and *edited* all interactions and transactions with the participants according to my own schema. The IP approach is predicated on accepting the participants' experience and information at face value.

This understanding and the avoidance of the possible unconscious projection onto and editing of data, is the essence of a phenomenological inquiry. Moran (2000: 4) reiterates this point, stating that 'phenomenology's first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or, indeed, from science itself. As the intent of the study was to investigate the effect on

participants of undergoing the experience of P&SA, this determination of the core meaning of that phenomenon to the participants (free from any of my constructs) appeared appropriate. Thus, as an empirical, interactive and interpretative method, IP was adopted as a fitting method to succeed AR during Phase Two of the investigation.

In order to maintain as much common ground as possible between Phase One and Phase Two of the research, it was established that the chosen method, IP, would blend with GT in the same way as AR and GT had meshed in Phase One. The common ground shared between IP and GT is shown by Moustakas (1994), which is illustrated in Table 3.5.

**Table 3.5:** Commonalities shared between phenomenology and grounded theory

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Appreciate the import of qualitative research methods, investigations of phenomena which cannot be studied quantitatively.</li> <li>2. Study phenomena holistically</li> <li>3. Seek the implications and fundamental nature of phenomena instead of measuring or rationalising them</li> <li>4. Gather data formally and informally through individual discourse</li> <li>5. Consider experiential accounts of phenomena as core scientific evidence in social science studies</li> <li>6. Design the investigative tools which resonate with the investigator's aims and pursuits</li> <li>7. Regard perceptions of phenomena and actions as integral parts of the individual which can not be separated.</li> </ol> |
|--|

Source: Researcher, adapted from Moustakas, 1994: 21

In practical terms, the theoretical commonalities between IP and GT methods as outlined above in Table 3.5 can be better appreciated by examining the stages of an IP approach as portrayed in Table 3.6 below. It is notable to see that, apart from the level of prescription, the overall procedure closely parallels that of a GT approach.

**Table 3.6:** Stages in interpretative phenomenological analysis of the data

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Action</b>
1. Interviews, focus groups, discussions	Prepare value-free, open questions suitable to the participant sample (first stage of 'bracketing' [Husserl, 1931]: questions are free from researcher preconceptions, and designed to generate substantial reflection by the participant on the experience)
2. Reading and Re-reading	Immerse self in data: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- listen to transcription tape</li><li>- Read interview</li><li>- Read field notes on interview and discount own feelings ('bracketing' [Husserl, 1931])</li><li>- Re-read interview from participant's perspective, looking for structure (the more detailed dialogue provides greater insight into the participant's mindset during reflection on the experience)</li></ul>
3. Initial noting	Note taking during repeated reading of text in Stage 1 (avoiding abstraction of points of interest; trying to maintain 'bracketing'; taking notes on all data; noting particularly changes in structure and syntax and conceptual ideas)
4. Developing emergent themes	Read notes from Stage 2 for each interview, identifying main concepts (concise summaries only)
5. Searching for connections across emergent themes	Working only with concepts from stage three, order them into related clusters, retaining only relevant concepts
6. Moving to the next case	Repeat Stages 1 to 4 for each participant interviewed in the study
7. Looking for patterns across cases	Compare concepts from all interviews to create emergent themes

Source: Stage 1: Researcher; other stages adapted from Smith *et al* (2009)

In summary, while AR was employed in Phase One and the IP approach adopted during Stage Two, a GT method was employed in the handling and analysis of the data throughout the research.



### 3.4 METHODS

Discussing the design of a mixed method approach, Morse (2003) stresses the importance of maintaining a congruent stance between the core methodology and the strands adopted from other methodologies. The adopted strategies had to be coherent with the core method, including methods of data gathering and analysis. In order to achieve this aim, the methodologies were selected for both the congruence of their values and their application, as discussed above. It needs restating that the research design was not a simple once off process. It changed, grew in complexity and catapulted me down many avenues as the research evolved. Plummer (2005: 357) paints an accurate and graphic picture of this process when he concludes that ‘research – like life – is a contradictory, messy affair. Only on the pages of “How-to-do-it” research methods texts or in the classrooms of research methods courses can it be sorted out into linear stages, clear protocols, and firm principles’. For example, as has been outlined earlier, at the beginning of this research, AR was the core component with strategies drawn on from GT. As the scope of the study broadened, GT became the central methodology to maintain consistency with AR and IP contributing strategies to this. The methods of gathering the data had to remain common to and consistent with, not only GT, but also AR and IP. The data gathering tools had also to be concordant with the mixed method design. The tools common to all methodologies were interviews, focus groups, formal and informal discussions, research diary and observation. The interview is seen as the leader and the best way of providing answers to questions about an individual’s experience (Morse, 2003; Steeves, 2000). Emphasis is firmly identified with the statement that ‘the long interview is the method through which data is collected on the topic and question’ (Moustakas, 1994: 114).

The data gathering in all studies commenced with introductory meetings. Within my own practice this was a matter of introducing the students to P&SA in the first lecture of the relevant semester. With the external studies this involved introductory meetings with the respective principals, co-ordinators and teachers. The meetings with teachers included discussing age-appropriate vocabulary for their students, as my experience was mainly in speaking to more mature students. The next meeting was with the teacher and students to introduce the research and the concept of P&SA. The research process followed this format and is discussed in detail in Section 3.7.

### **3.5 THE RESEARCH STUDIES**

The participants have been outlined in Chapter 1, Table 1.3. While that report again provides an accurate account of the participant cohorts, it does not give any real sense of the *persons* themselves. To add life to the participants, and to situate the data gathering within their context, a brief account of how the participant cohorts were selected together with a description of the participants is provided.

#### **3.5.1 SAMPLING**

Creswell (2003: 185) points out that ‘the idea behind qualitative research is to *purposefully* select participants or sites . . . that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question’. In a similar vein, it is argued by Sumser (2001: 62) that ‘the most important thing about a sample is that it can provide an answer to the question you are asking’. He also suggests that other influencing factors appear to be those often associated with carrying out research, budget and timescale. He assumes that most research in the humanities is carried out with the aim of finding a general theory which can be applied to the wider population. In the case of these

studies, it will provide an indication of the applicability of the effects of P&SA to all educational levels, from primary school onwards.

In common with other AR studies, the sampling in Phase One was fixed – it might be termed convenience sampling (Kemper *et al*, 2003; Berg, 2004), as the availability of the student cohort meant the participants were convenient. Berg cautions that this type of sampling may lead to the use of participants not best suited to the research. In my case this was an added advantage, as the cohort were the best sample to answer the specific research question about their experience of assessment (also, as it was AR, it had to be in my practice).

In Phase Two, the sampling strategy remained the same for the higher education students. Due to the changing scope of the research when carried out in external institutions, a different sampling strategy was required; the specific aim was to expand the research over a wide scope of participants, covering a range which is as wide as possible in terms of learner ages and educational levels. Purposive or judgmental sampling (Berg, 2004) or stratified purposive sampling (Kemper *et al*, 2003) are the terms employed to describe such sampling, where participants are chosen because they cover certain levels or categories of a property or properties of the participants (in this case all possible ages and educational levels). From the viewpoint of a phenomenologist, such a sampling strategy may be termed ‘criterion sampling’ described by (Rudestam and Newton, 2001: 92) as ‘selecting participants who closely match the criteria of the study’: the participants in these studies had all experienced P&SA.

### 3.5.2 SITUATING THE PARTICIPANTS

In *higher education* following the completed initial cycle of the research, P&SA had become part of my normal practice. The research was continued into Phase One, with the aim of determining whether the positive effects on motivation found in the initial cycle were maintained. Throughout Phase One the *introduction* (of the new assessment method and procedure into the module) of the P&SA was no longer strictly part of the research – the research itself comprised of the post-assessment investigation into the effects of the assessment, as described in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3. For the sake of consistency of description, this section is written as if the introduction of P&SA were still part of the research, so comparison may be drawn between the different participant cohorts.

In **Phase One**, with two consecutive cohorts of *first-year students*, I met with them in their first class of the semester. Both classes now included foundation year students. Also, the students age continued to span from about 18 plus to 50 plus. Some of the students were employed on a part-time basis in an educational or training context. Other students were employed elsewhere part-time, or were not in employment. All of the students were full-time.

It is customary to provide students with an outline of the module and timetable for the semester and this lent itself to introducing the students to the element of P&SA. As is usually the case with first-year students, excitement on their first day was palpable. Similar questions were raised in both cycles as had been raised by the students in the initial cycle when first introduced to P&SA, for example, how the marks would affect the students' overall grades, whether a peer could award zero marks, and what was to stop them giving themselves full marks. Common to all these studies, the noise level during this discussion was markedly hushed. The students in both classes were of

mixed gender, and, as already described in Section 1.4, students were very diverse in terms of age, socio-economic and ethnic background, and third-level access route. As this was the same module as taught in the initial cycle, both classes of the students worked together in groups to research one topic they had selected from a list of topics which had been covered during the module lectures: at the end of the semester they made a presentation on this element of their work for assessment.

In **Phase Two**, the *final-year, full-time* students had all taken part in P&SA. The difference between P&SA in first year and final year is that in first year the students' marks could not affect their graduation grade, whereas in their final year it would. The students made no particular reference to the P&SA element of their assessment though they understood its impact on their final grade. They acted as though they felt it was within their stride and some remarked they were well used to it at that stage (this point is discussed further in the findings). The students worked in groups to present out on a topic which they had chosen from a range of subjects covered during their lectures.

I met with the *final-year, part-time* students in their first class also. The part-time students, mainly employed in education or training, attended class in the evening where they were studying to secure or add further to their professional qualifications. The class was of mixed gender and the age range was around 20 plus to 50 plus. The students had a shared background through their experience in teaching, training or educational management, but none had any experience of P&SA. In common with the other classes, I introduced P&SA to the students on their first night. The students were matter of fact about the assessment and there were no issues raised. The students were open and asked questions on what the P&SA element of their assessment entailed. Some students were interested in how they would be allocated to groups. Some expressed concern because they had experienced difficulties working on group-based

activities while others said that if students formed the groups themselves it could be a cause for consternation. At this stage, how the students would be allocated to groups appeared to concern the students more than the prospect of P&SA itself. The part-time students worked in their groups to deliver a presentation on a subject chosen from topics contained in their module.

*Secondary Education:* The *community school*, which served a rural area, provided a mixed gender class in comparison to the *secondary school*, which was situated in an urban setting, where all students were girls. In both schools, the students were in transition year, aged about 16 years and in both cases the teacher was female. In the secondary school, the teacher was also the co-ordinator of the year. The teacher in the community school was not the co-ordinator, whereas the co-ordinator of the community school was male. The principals in both schools were also male.

The initial meeting was with the principals to seek permission. The principals were very welcoming of the research and both considered it to be very useful for the students to take part. Both viewed the research as an opportunity to give students more input into their transition-year community-based projects. As examples of the projects undertaken, a secondary school group looked into the area of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) while a community school group investigated badminton as an available sporting activity in the community. The teachers pointed out to the students that taking part in the research and completing the projects could be beneficially included in their *Curricula Vitae*. I met with the students in their classrooms in both schools and explained what I was doing. I received a good response to my invitation to them to join in the research. The students were interested in knowing how the assessment would affect their test marks.

*Further Education:* in the *early school leaver* centre, the co-ordinator was male and the teacher was female. At the first meeting with the centre co-ordinator, he was hesitant, wondering how the students would deal with the concept of the research and with my visits to the centre. He called the teacher into the room, introduced me to her and asked me to explain what was involved in the research. Following the discussion, he said he was willing to join in, but with a little trepidation. He described the students' propensity to be very vocal in communicating their views on matters which did not satisfy their expectations or ideas they did not 'buy into'. Despite the co-ordinator's hesitancy, the teacher was eager to participate and a date was arranged for me to meet with the class.

The class was small, with six out of a total of eight students present. It was a mixed gender class with students appearing to range from about fifteen to eighteen years of age. They asked a lot of questions about the research, then said they would like to join in, asking when they would start. The co-ordinator and teacher were pleased with this reaction from the students and expressed keen interest in finding out how the research and the assessment would affect the students. The assessment would be carried out as part of a social module with the students working in groups creating collages.

There were two classes of senior learner participants, one in an urban setting and the other within a rural area. The age range was from around 40 to 70 plus. The *rural senior learner* class was introduced to me by the co-ordinator of transition year at the same community school where I was already carrying out the research with transition year (mentioned earlier). The senior learners, all female, were involved in an intergenerational learning programme and the co-ordinator organised transition year students to pair with senior learners for a computer application class. The participants worked in groups to compile a report for their assessment. This was the first time they

had been involved in a formal learning environment for a considerable time, and it follows that they had not experienced any form of assessment either. That said, the learners had all experienced some form of assessment when they had been in school. The teacher (female) and the co-ordinator left it entirely up to the learners to decide whether they wished to participate or not: some students declined, some were immediate in accepting and some accepted with encouragement from their classmates.

While both the transition year and the senior learners at this community school were taking part in the research, the studies were separate and distinct. Each class of students was treated independently and confidentiality maintained, although there was no specific instruction given not to discuss the research.

The *urban senior learner* class was also comprised of learners, both male and female, who were involved in an intergenerational learning programme, working on a science appreciation class. Both the co-ordinator and teacher were female. I met initially with the co-ordinator of the programme to discuss the research which had been intended to be a non-assessed programme. The co-ordinator was receptive and agreed to the research. She said it could be a positive way of introducing an element of innovative assessment into the programme. In initial email communication with the teacher she agreed to participate in the study. I met with the teacher and the senior learners in the class and, as was the case with the rural senior learners, it was left to the students own discretion whether to participate or not in the research. At this first meeting I discussed what the research entailed and followed it up with time for questions and answers. It was notable that some learners remained quiet while others were very vocal on the advantages of taking part, encouraging everyone to join in. The teacher remained quiet during this discussion, leaving it to the students to decide. The students were hesitant and requested time to think about it. They wanted time to meet with each other to



discuss taking part in the study. I attended the class on the following week and discussed the research further. Not all students agreed to participate, but those who volunteered were enthusiastic and eager to get started. The teacher presented a variety of science topics to the class each week, and those who did participate in the research worked in groups to research one of those topics covered by the teacher, and present their work for assessment. Unlike the teacher of the rural senior learners class, the teacher in the urban senior learn class needed time to reflect on the application of an assessment scheme with a summative component and its potential impact on the senior learners.

In the *Primary school* I first met with the principal who was female. At that meeting we discussed the research. The principal was interested in having the school involved in the research and explored the possibility of either one of the teachers (both female) from fourth or fifth class participating. Subsequent to that meeting I met with the principal a second time and was informed that fourth class (students were approximately ten years old) had been selected. I met the teacher of fourth class where she agreed to take part in the study and we discussed ideas for group projects which the students would benefit from in addition to participating in the study. The teacher decided on energy saving as an appropriate exercise because the students could work within the home and school environments as well as using the internet to access information. The teacher invited me back to meet with the students who were eager and wholehearted in their response to my invitation to participate in the research and P&SA.

In Phase Two I have included data gathered from a series of interviews with teachers who have conducted their own P&SA, without participating in this series of studies. A partial description has already been provided in Chapter 1. I contacted each teacher initially and met with them informally. I then met with each teacher subsequent to the

teacher finishing the P&SA module for a formal interview. I did not meet or interview any of the students in relation to these P&SA experiences. Table 3.7 summarises the details of these P&SA modules.

**Table 3.7:** Contributory data sources not from one of the studies

<i>Area</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Details</i>
HE	G.	First-year undergraduates	07/08	Two modules (full year) – Physics
HE	H.	First-year undergraduates	06/07 07/08	One module [the same cohort as the researcher, one semester later]
HE	I.	Postgraduates	08/09	Conducted throughout the module in group peer evaluation sessions
FE	J.	English (foreign language)	07/08	Carried out with own students following undergoing P&SA previously with the researcher

Source: Researcher

### 3.5.3 STUDY ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

Working with own students it was relatively easy to carry out the studies, but it was harder to administrate the research because it was fitted into the normal working class and working day. I introduced P&SA during the first class of the semester for internal studies, and kept the order of the process in line with the order described in Section 3.5.4 below. The order described is that of the initial study process to help ensure the studies were systematically carried out regardless of space or time. Researching with external stakeholders left it that the first class I attended with these participants was not necessarily their first class of the term or semester. Nevertheless, the format and the process flow were consistently adhered to. Attention is drawn to the external institutions taking part in Phase Two where it must be highlighted that, because the teachers and students were new to P&SA, I was necessarily present at all times during the P&SA process. The teachers and students otherwise worked in their normal way, carrying out their day's work, including their projects as part of their normal day. The study format is outlined in Section 3.9

With the teachers for guidance, my language and pace was modified to suit the students. For example, the practicality of IP's 'bracketing' concept quickly manifested itself when I was discussing the allocation of marks with the primary teacher. Naturally and generally, immersed in calculating to one hundred percent, my schema was to this order, until the teacher pointed out the students and her reality by saying 'the girls wouldn't understand that because I always mark them out of ten'. Although I understood that the ten equated with a hundred percent, I referred always to 'ten' from that point onwards.

In all schools I enquired if students had access to the internet and all participating schools confirmed they had access and students were either learning to become proficient or were already computer literate and could work with a computer, including accessing and working on the Internet. I thought this was important because I was working toward developing a programme to enable students to complete their assessment online.

#### 3.5.4 *STUDY PROCESS FLOW*

For consistency the following procedure, which had been successfully used in the initial study (Harrison, 2006), was followed:

- (1) Presented student sample criteria and P&SA guide (Appendix B)
  - a. Discussed forms with teachers (where applicable) – obtained feedback and suggestions (to ensure *inter alia* the language was age appropriate)
  - b. Introduced P&SA concept to class with assessment format and sample criteria
  - c. Introduced the assessment ethics

- d. Each student group selected own assessment criteria

(2) Held workshop on self- and peer-assessment procedure for students: included students' own selected criteria (Appendix C)

- e. Discussed draft presentation with teacher (where applicable) – obtained feedback and suggestions (to ensure *inter alia* the language was age appropriate)
- f. Workshop with presentation (PowerPoint or paper copy) including students' own criteria (Appendix C, C1-C3)

(3) Self- and Peer-assessment

- g. Conducted practice P&SA session (except the rural group of senior learners, where this step was omitted due to lack of time) (Appendix D)
- h. Provided sample assessment calculations
- i. Conducted P&SA (Appendix D)

(4) Feedback – assessment results

- j. Prepared and presented (with the external teacher, where applicable) feedback and assessment sheets
- k. Provided students with grades and feedback from assessment (together with the external teacher, where applicable) (Appendix E, E1-E3)

(5) Data gathering

- l. Revised (and reviewed, where applicable, with the external teacher) data gathering tools to ensure they were age appropriate
- m. Maintained research log

- n. Students completed questionnaires (Appendix F): IMI (F1-F2), or Self-Reliance (F4-F8) and Readiness for Self-Directed Learning (F9)
- o. Carried out interviews with students
- p. Conducted focus group interviews
- q. Held informal meetings with teachers and other stakeholders as applicable
- r. Interviewed teachers and co-ordinators
- s. Transcribed focus group and individual interviews

(6) Analysed data (Conclusions and Recommendations)

- t. Analysed findings
- u. Recommendations suggested
- v. Conclusions drawn

### 3.5.5 *STUDY PEER- AND SELF-ASSESSMENT DESIGN*

The assessment design was influenced by Brown and Smith (1997), Race (1998), Brown *et al* (1997) and Biggs (1999), and especially Lejk and Wyvill (2002) with their discussion on holistic and category-based approaches. The assessment was in two parts: 1) a formative component, with criteria for the provision of feedback to be selected by the students, and 2) a summative component for the students to assess overall individual contribution.

For the formative component, each group of students selected and agreed criteria which they believed important elements in the process (for example, mutual respect, equal division of work, quality of work, attendance at meetings, sense of humour,

punctuality). Each student marked her/himself and peers in the group on a five-point Likert scale: none, poor, fair, good or excellent. (For the purpose of giving feedback, each of these scale-points was assigned a score of 0 to 4 which was averaged and rounded for each student in each criterion).

The summative component consisted of two parts: (a) tutor mark based on how well the *product* (the presentation) met the objectives and (b) in each group, each student awarded a mark for the contribution to the *process* from each member (including her/himself), on a scale of: 0 = *none*, 1 = *poor*, 2 = *fair*, 3 = *good* and 4 = *excellent contribution*. This provided a weighting factor calculated by the student's mark divided by the highest student's mark in the group. Each group member received a *pro rata* mark which would consist of the tutor's mark for the product (a), multiplied by the weighting factor (b) and rounded up. (The group member(s) with the highest mark automatically received the tutor mark). The calculation of marks is summarised in Figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2:** calculation of summative P&SA mark

$$\text{Mark} = \frac{[\text{tutor mark for presentation}] \cdot [\text{student's mark}]}{[\text{highest student's mark in the group}]}$$

Source: Researcher

### 3.6 DATA GATHERING

Data were gathered from a number of different viewpoints. Using multiple tools to gather data with the same focus was a measure taken to provide triangulation of the methods. The questionnaires were drawn on to include a quantitative dimension, with the intent of providing methodological triangulation.

The data gathering was conducted entirely in the relevant school, centre or college, save for one exception which is noted below (foot of Subsection 3.7.1). In both Phase One and Phase Two, the questionnaires were completed in the classrooms, and except where noted, a separate room was made available for individual and focus group interviews: the issue of privacy is seen by Wragg (2002: 144) as important in helping to assuage feelings of having to ‘act in a certain way’ due to the peer-pressure, especially within an educational context. The students were invited to volunteer to be interviewed, whether individually or as part of a focus group. In the external studies in Phase Two, I worked with each external teacher/co-ordinator to schedule the data gathering around class timetables. This requirement had not applied in the internal Phase One and Phase Two studies because I had been scheduling the class work.

In guiding the researcher, Silverman (2010: 10) advises that ‘in choosing a method of research, everything depends upon what you are trying to find out. No method . . . quantitative or qualitative, is intrinsically better than any other’. This advice provides a measure of justification for the mixed styles of the range of methods used. Qualitative data gathering methods were used to encourage a descriptive, in-depth narrative from which a generalised theory may be built, with a quantitative element to allow a more traditional, formal measurement of sought specifics (Motivation, Self-reliance and Self-direction).

### 3.6.1 *INTERVIEWING*

Fitzpatrick *et al* (1998: 56) highlight that when it comes to gathering data ‘the researcher needs two basic skills: the ability to formulate informative questions and the ability to listen – mostly the latter, but many researchers get mixed up and concentrate on the former’. It is easy to see where their reasoning is coming from. After ensuring that all the pressing practicalities and technicalities are correct and in place, and before

arriving in the *participant's space*, a quiet mind has to be attained so that listening can begin. For example, Steeves (2000: 35) puts fieldwork into perspective by describing the amount of detailed preparation that must be attended to before the researcher even considers embarking on an interview. He makes the point by itemising many work tools which have to be at the interviewer's hand, including a large bag, divided, containing in its compartments everything from pens to notebooks and from tapes to recording equipment. He could have also added a map and transport to get to the interview. Nevertheless, it was important to ensure the questions were ready, age appropriate and piloted in an effort to ensure the smooth running of the interview process, and to ensure adequate preparedness to devote full attention to listening to the participant when it came to the interview.

Interview strategies are discussed by Fisher (2007) who reflects on three different interview strategies, *open*, *pre-coded* and *semi-structured* interviews. He suggests *open* style interviews allow the participant generally to take the lead. The researcher may exert a small degree of influence in guiding the participant in a particular direction, following points or ideas raised by the interviewee, but the participant in the main leads the interview. Fisher's second approach, the *pre-coded* interview, is researcher led. Questions are programmed and to a systematic sequence, in multiple choice format, where the interviewee is required to respond by selecting one or more suggested answers. His last style, *semi-structured*, which he describes as falling between the two other strategies, is appropriate to this study. Here, the interviewer has an inventory to follow as an *aide-mémoire*, but 'the respondent has much latitude to respond to the questions in the ways that seem sensible to them' (p 159).

This description of the semi-structured interview ably conveys the significant advantage in adopting this style of interview throughout the studies. Because the data gathered



had to be consistent across all levels, it needed to draw on an appropriate level of uniformity in questioning; at the same time, it had to build in the flexibility needed to adapt to different educational levels and age groups. For example, the questions had to encompass the participants' experience of their assessment, which meant there had to be a common thread of relevance to this experience built into the questions, in order to allow for the drawing of comparisons for data analysis. Without a set of questions the data could have become fragmented and incomplete, losing focus and maybe becoming irrelevant: it is difficult to expect a diverse group of individuals, even when prompted to speak about an occurrence or experience, to cover all aspects of that and only that particular phenomenon. Senge *et al*, (1994:391) assert that 'the best way to assure a single focus is to make sure that every participant expects to talk about the same subject'. Within this suggested boundary, I could draw on open ended questions which 'require slightly more by way of cognitive engagement before the answerer is able to give a considered response' (Fautley and Savage, 2008: 38, 39). I could also adapt the language to the participants understanding. These measures would both prompt conscious reflection and allow the learners express their experience of assessment in their own unique way, otherwise undirected by me, the researcher.

Organising participants, time and resources was another factor which had to be considered. In theory, an interview needs to be as in-depth as necessary to ensure the participant is made comfortable, relaxed and unhurried to generate worthwhile data. In practice, the teachers, co-ordinators and principals had to delve deep to find time and a room that was free for a worthwhile length of time. Generally, it was easier to organise the interviews with students than it was with the teachers or co-ordinators because the students who had volunteered could leave the class relatively unhindered: there were times when some of the teachers or co-ordinators had to have that extra motivation needed to get in early to speak to me (for organisational purposes or for interview)

before classes commenced, during their lunch hour or when classes had finished for the day.

It has also to be noted that there was a wide participant age range, which caused the average length of the interviews to vary. To a mature student, a forty minute interview where s/he is listening to and answering questions can be taken within her/his stride, but it would be unrealistic to expect such a level of interaction and span of concentration from a child. There is always an exception to the rule: I observed one ten year old who could easily have outlasted some of the older participants; however, overall the interviews with the primary school students were of a shorter duration than with the more mature participants.

Difficulties were experienced by the teacher of the rural senior learner class in finding time for interviews because I had been introduced to the class part-way through the term. This study had to be fitted within a narrower timeframe because the senior learners' class ended in that particular term, meaning I had to forego individual interviews and be satisfied with one focus group interview.

As noted, the data gathering was within the confines of the participants' school, centre or college. The one exception where the interview was conducted outside the institution was with one senior learner from the urban senior learner cohort, who had been unavailable during the scheduled interview timetable. This learner made arrangements to be interviewed at a later time, and I interviewed the student at a venue specified by the participant.

### *3.6.2 FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS*

Morse and Niehaus (2009: 90) emphasise the benefits of the focus group interview and at the same time they show that shared experience is the core value of this data gathering tool as they state:

focus groups are very efficient ways to elicit opinions or to rapidly develop a beginning understanding of an area . . . The group participants . . . are usually selected according to some criteria – they have had a certain experience in common [in this case, P&SA].

In the participating schools, colleges and centres, the research was implemented by a sole teacher, with the support, where applicable, of the co-ordinator or principal, the only staff involved; the urban secondary school was the only study where the teacher was also the co-ordinator. Because of this, the conditions did not exist to allow focus group interviews with staff to be held. For this reason, it was considered more appropriate to hold individual interviews with the teachers and co-ordinators.

Focus group interviews were held with learners in addition to the individual interviews, including elementary pupils, early school leavers, senior learners, second-level students and third-level students. In most cases it was easier to organise individual interviews than it was for participants to either find time or circumstances which would permit them to collectively meet for a focus group interview. However, as noted already, in the case of the rural senior learner participants, despite all attempts to organise time, circumstance and resources, the focus group interview was the best option, probably the only option, because it was not possible to arrange and carry out the individual interviews. The students programme was complete, and there was no follow-on class, therefore there was no opportunity to rearrange the study.

The focus group interviews necessitated a different strategy to the individual interviews. With up to six learners in a group, care had to be exercised in keeping the voices distinct and recognisable. Trying to encourage student spontaneity and depth of reflection on the questions and to provide the freedom to express views unreservedly is usually easier to realise, though not always, in the context of individual interviews. The reason for this is that participants can tend to speak at the same time during a collective

interview, if the interview is allowed to flow freely for the spontaneity. During the actual interview it may be clear who has said what and when, but without an identifying marker for later analysis of the data, and a way of limiting the speakers to one at a time, such as the interviewer calling on each participant by name to speak, it is almost impossible to decipher or to remember who said what and when, despite the recording equipment recording every single word spoken at the time.

To offset this disadvantage, I always met with the participant group prior to the interview. I explained about this difficulty and sought their help with overcoming it, suggesting it would help if they could nod, raise a hand or some gesture which would allow me to know who wanted to answer the question and to voice their name before s/he spoke (the participant's name was the identifying marker which aided the data analysis). This time with the learners allowed me to become familiar with each person and to use her/his name. It meant that the learner could begin to feel more comfortable with me and that during the interview itself, hearing me use her/his name would not feel so strange. It also helped allay any student's anxiety by being reminded that everything they said was in confidence and their names would be replaced with a pseudonym. These steps were taken on the understanding that unless the learners were sufficiently relaxed with each other and me, the dynamics of the interview could have lacked the necessary interplay to provide in-depth data. It should be mentioned that, as in all areas of life, including interviews, there are individuals who are very at ease speaking and those who are more reticent. To ensure capturing as many different points of view as possible, attention was paid to drawing in the quieter students and to ensuring no one person dominated the interviewed, although the more outspoken learner's views were never quenched, only delayed.

Although individual interviews may have more depth because they are more personalised and greater rapport can be achieved with one person, the focus group interviews can produce richer data through the synergy of multiple recollections of the same phenomenon (assessment) in the group.

### 3.6.3 OBSERVATION

Observation permeated the research. It was necessary to be self-vigilant because this method of gathering data resides in the eye of the beholder. In each study, the participants were new, but the process with each cohort of participants became familiar to me. To avoid complacency, each study was approached afresh. Expectations were held in check, with every attempt made to ensure assumptions were not allowed to cross over from one study to another ('bracketing' (Husserl, 1931)).

The use of observation as a research tool is discussed by Johnson and Turner (2003) who see it as a key approach to collecting data. They make the correlation between having a good relationship with participants to strengthen the data gathering value of the interview with creating a good surrounding to strengthen the value of the observation in order to help the participant relax more in order to forget the presence of the researcher. The absence of expectations during the studies reduced pressure on participants to act in any way contrary to their normal selves, making this ideal more attainable. Through time the participants did begin to feel at ease and act and talk more freely than they would have initially. However, it is not easy to define how relaxed participants became. The only measurement of this would have been to observe how they behaved and spoke. As these were special visits by the researcher (an outsider), there is always the element that although appearing *relaxed*, participants may still have retained a *formal sense of relaxation*, and were not entirely relaxed or at ease. It would

have needed more time to elapse before the participants could have become acclimatised to the research and more relaxed with me, or *vice versa*. Nevertheless, the interactive relations were cordial and respectful. This helped to provide a pleasant environment within the surroundings of the overall college, school or centre. In the circumstances, the fixed surroundings of the context could not be changed. Table 3.8 outlines the advantages and disadvantages of observation as a method of collecting data.

**Table 3.8:** Observation as data gathering tool: advantages and disadvantages

<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Direct observation triangulates with data obtained from narrative to confirm (or negate) adding to reliability</li> <li>○ Adds a measure of objectivity (dependent on researcher objectivity)</li> <li>○ Can compensate for participants' poor narrative (poor use of English, poor reporting skills)</li> <li>○ Adds to richness, context of description (observation <i>in situ</i> with environment open to observation)</li> <li>○ Adds realism to description (reported in "real life" rather than disembodied narrative in formal environment)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Reports only the observed actions, not the unseen reasons underlying the action</li> <li>○ Observation by researcher can in itself act to modify participant behaviour</li> <li>○ Magnifies any researcher bias (only see what is expected)</li> <li>○ Magnifies any researcher bias (researcher over-empathises, 'sides' with participant group)</li> <li>○ Validity fragile (subjective interpretation as reported)</li> <li>○ Unsuitable to large populations, large studies, 'busy' context (can be expensive, time-consuming to report and analyse)</li> </ul>

Source: Researcher, adapted from Johnson and Turner (2003: 315)

During the studies no issues were raised in relation to the taking of notes. The participants were aware during the process that their names and other identifying markers would not be known. As applied to all of the data gathering tools, confidentiality was assured. In this context, the assurance helped to create trust and a comfort zone, encouraging participants to speak and behave more naturally within.

Thus, their comfort made their surroundings more conducive to collecting more worthwhile data. These data were recorded in the reflective journal for analysis.

#### 3.6.4 *INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS*

‘Informal’ tends to conjure visions of discussions which are perceived as having a lower value than ‘formal’ discussions. In reality the formal can be dependent on the informal. Informal meetings are not as rigid, which means interaction is correspondingly less rigid. As has been noted under *Observation* above, when participants are not speaking or acting *officially* or *on the record* they are not as guarded in their revelations.

Informal discussions can lead to richer encounters and disclosures at a later time during formal meeting such as the interview or focus group meeting.

The informal discussion helped carry the studies through rough waters. Elasticity, patience and tolerance underpinned informal discussions, which ranged from the more lengthy face-to-face discussions to the one line text message. With the use of electronic communication, informal meeting took on a new meaning. The speed of sending or receiving a message by email or by mobile phone helped in providing a quick answer to an impromptu question. To name a few, this medium of informal discussion was used to help organise visits, arrange and clarify dates, times, names, or clarify a point from a previous face-to-face discussion. The studies, work pace and outcomes would have been much curtailed if face-to-face discussions had been the only option for communicating informally with participants. The time available was stretched further by these electronic aids. Also, the ability to make quick and spontaneous two-way contact helped to build a rapport with the participants, which helped when greater time was needed for the face-to-face discussions. For example, a face-to-face discussion was

more appropriate when explaining the P&SA process or when the teacher was facilitating learners determine their own assessment criteria.

Communication was central to all interactions. This reality could not be brushed over lightly because of its bearing on the quantity and quality of data collected. The same awareness which was needed when choosing the most appropriate data collection tools had to be afforded to an awareness of the necessity to communicate effectively with participants. In discussing effective communication, Robbins (2000) raises a challenge which had to be taken into account as he highlights one obstacle which could have stood in the way of effectively communicating with both male and female participants:

for many men [boys], conversations are primarily a means to preserve independence and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. For many women [girls], conversations are negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support.

The research was not just an academic exercise. The participants were not solely engaged with the more academic side of the process, but as mentioned already, relational and other needs (Maslow, 1954) are inexorably present, as are the habits accrued by socialisation. Informal discussions helped assuage fears (participants and mine) because they provided time for all stakeholders to get a *feel* for what was happening. Again, stress is placed on keeping a check on expectations and assumptions, on my part.

Informal discussions helped establish participants' interest in participating in the research study in the first place and it was the informal discussions which sustained the research to the end. These discussions also provided data in relation to the students and P&SA which would not have come to light otherwise. For example, in two different venues, each teacher confided in me about one of their students who had a psychological problem. The teachers both conveyed how they were observing the



effects of the P&SA process on the particular student in question. Both these teachers were interviewed, but neither one referred to this finding. Another example is where a student, during an informal discussion mentioned that she did not understand fully how P&SA worked and how if there had been full understanding at the time, the peer marking element would have been different.

In all cases the informal discussions were held with the principal, teacher or co-ordinator. Any informal interaction or discussion with learners was organised through the teacher and with the teacher's approval and were held within the confines of the school, college, or centre.

### 3.6.5 *RESEARCHER REFLECTIVE JOURNAL*

Keeping a journal or log, which appears to be personal to the researcher, is accepted as a significant research tool (Snowman and Biehler, 2003); (Silverman, 2010).

Some of the advantages of keeping a log may be enumerated as it permits:

- ❑ a method of concentrating on the salient points
- ❑ recording of concepts
- ❑ noting of observations and the initial reflections on them
- ❑ trialling of interview questions
- ❑ recording of initial impressions on data collected

Adapted from Wield (2002: 39)

Conroy (2003: 47) adds that a journal can also help trace the 'researcher's understandings, misunderstandings and decisions. These can then be used in the interrogation of the researcher's interpretations. This interrogation provokes insights

into one's role as researcher and the influence of the researcher on the process'. These views help to illustrate the variety of ways in which the research journal can aid in the research. In many ways it helped lighten the journey because it became so familiar and 'as a way of developing a reflective ongoing relationship with oneself and one's work, a personal journal is hard to beat' (Burnaford *et al*, 2001:17). Many times the journal helped to remind me of tasks which were still outstanding and in need of urgent attention. At other times there were gaps in the journal where attending to the same urgent details left little time to record or write about them. There were other times when it burdened the journey and chided because it indicated that progress was slow. It helped show the imbalance between too much reading around topics under review and too little time recorded on engaging with the practical or the writing up of the research, *vice versa*. At the same time it provided a record of the constant juggling to get this balance right because, when working with others, they are trying to make time available and there were many times when, at the last minute, a text might come in to say the day or time would have to be rearranged: every change had a knock-on effect on the plan of work. Sometimes it was an easy task to swap times over with another school, college or centre, at other times it meant having to reschedule the entire plan, which meant another span of what then became lost time.

Throughout the research journey, the journal remained in place and constant, which was an advantage when there were so many rapid changes to account for and to contend with. The log accepted all writings, good and bad, and held onto them while sense was trying to be made of these thoughts and happenings. In effect the journal provided the space and time, uncensored, to put the thoughts down and to capture the texture of the ongoing narrative. Morrison (2002: 229) points in this direction as she states that one of the principal benefits of keeping a journal is that 'they [diaries] are able to be used

not just to record what happened, or what people did, but also some of the vital contextual information that relates to these events and peoples' reactions to them'. She also points out the investment in time needed to maintain a diary can, in reality, become a burdensome obligation.

Keeping a research journal can be viewed as a long-term as well as a short-term investment. For example, the much earlier journal which documented the research conducted during the initial study helped with the present research despite the time lapse. Reflecting on the entries of the earlier journal helped to keep the present research in perspective. Documenting a similar research road, it showed the setbacks which had been encountered and surmounted and the minor milestones which were achieved, boosting the motivation to keep on track. Reflected in the journal is one particular trait which by necessity must thread and weave its way through the research journey: endurance.

The reflective journal was beneficial in documenting observations. All notes (including observations) were recorded either at the time or immediately afterwards. At the time usually meant writing as inconspicuously as possible in a classroom or interview or meeting room and, if not finished, completing the unfinished notes afterwards (afterwards meant I would write the notes up in the car before leaving the school, centre or college). When I had access to a computer these notes were then transferred onto a word processor: this was one disadvantage of not having a laptop, which I did not have during the research.

Working internally, I wrote the notes either immediately as they had happened or input them on computer as soon as I had access to one. Where possible, the preference was to input the notes on computer to save on handwritten work. This saved time because it

meant I did not have to write the data up and then input the same data onto the computer, making this more of an arduous task than it need have been.

All notes (observations included) were kept on computer for the data analysis, which helped lessen the work involved in this task. Although a hard copy of the notes would have been quick to compile, it would have laboured the process of the analysis because of the difficulty in piecing together data from hard copy compared to the speed of the computer.

The reflective journal entries themselves were also typed in to a word processing document.

#### 3.6.6 *QUESTIONNAIRES*

Following each study, learners completed a questionnaire or questionnaires. The questionnaires were completed in the school, centre or college, either immediately or very shortly after completing the assessment. Prior to using the questionnaires they were revised to ensure the language was both context- and age-appropriate. For example, the *self-reliance* questionnaire had been initially designed around a work context: this may have been appropriate to higher education students who, as noted, were working, but it was clearly inappropriate to school children who had no experience of being employed. With this in mind, the self-reliance questionnaire was reworded to reflect a relevant school context. In fact, the self-reliance questionnaire had separate revisions for primary school, secondary schools and for senior learners.

The revised questionnaire was then discussed with the relevant teacher and revised again if necessary, before being distributed to the learners. After distribution and before the learners completed the questionnaires, they were given the opportunity to read the

questions and to clarify their understanding. Also, all questionnaires were based on a Likert scale and time was taken to explain the use of this type of scale. During the actual completion of the questionnaires, participants were encouraged, where in doubt, to ask questions to clarify their understanding. Where it was practical, depending on the availability of a comparable group of learners, the questionnaires were also given to a control group who had not undertaken P&SA. A description of the questionnaires employed and their usage is provided as follows:

*Intrinsic Motivation Inventory* (IMI, 2005): The research drew on a questionnaire based on this inventory in Phase One. This questionnaire itself consisted of both open questions, designed to elicit the views of the students on the assessment they had undertaken, and closed questions taken from the IMI. This is an example of what Johnson and Turner (2003: 298) term '*intramethod mixing*' where the majority of items are closed questions gathering quantitative data (the IMI) and interspersed are open-ended questions designed to draw out the qualitative data by allowing free expression of student perceptions of both group work and P&SA.

The closed questions were an amended form of the IMI: this inventory was selected as it had been used by other researchers, with a satisfactory track record in relation to reliability and validity. The questions were taken from a list of seven sub-lists of questions, each of which had been originally designed to draw out responses from which an element related to intrinsic motivation could be measured. The questions were drawn from the four most relevant sub-lists. Some questions are replicated or reversed, to allow screening for questionnaires completed in an ill-considered or contrary way.

The IMI (2005) reports on the result of trials, giving comprehensive instructions on the construction of a questionnaire from the sets of questions: these are then to be modified to suit the topic (such as group work, after assessment). This procedure was followed, resulting in the final design of the questionnaire (see Appendix F, F1 and F2), which is based on questions from the *interest/enjoyment*, *perceived competence*, *effort/importance* and *pressure/tension* subsets for the closeness of the relationship to intrinsic motivation. The end result is a mixed questionnaire designed to elicit participants' feelings of intrinsic motivation after taking part in a group-based activity which had been assessed using a P&SA methodology.

This questionnaire was completed by the first and foundation year undergraduate cohorts of participants after they had completed their group-based project. As noted already, the control group from the initial study was used to determine a baseline. The control group was a cohort of second year students on the same programme, who had **not** undertaken P&SA, but who had completed the same module using a similar group-based project, and had completed the IMI questionnaire.

*Self-Reliance Inventory:* A questionnaire based on this inventory was drawn on in Phase Two of the research. In line with the aim of examining student self-efficacy, and sense of self-direction, the IMI was replaced at this stage by two tools designed to measure self-reliance and readiness for self-directed learning. The first of these, the *self-reliance inventory*, was designed to assess an individual's ability to cope with stress and anxiety. This inventory, tested by two groups of researchers which included its originators, consists of two subsets of questions, each of which examines the participant's self-reliance in a particular dimension (Quick, *et al* 1992; Quick, *et al* 1996). The two subsets of questions were designed to assess the participants' position, firstly along the self-reliance to counterdependence scale (10 questions), then secondly,

along the self-reliance to overdependence scale (6 questions). There is a one-question overlap (one question is common to both scales) giving a 15-item questionnaire, which is answered on a 6-point Likert scale. There are several reverse-scored questions, as in the motivation questionnaire, with two almost-duplicate reversed question-pairs, for example, *I trust at least two other people to have my best interests at heart, **versus** I am frequently suspicious of other people's motives and intentions.* Again, this was to allow for screening questionnaires which have been poorly completed.

The vocabulary of the questions was very specific to the workplace, which assumed a level of work experience (to be able to at least appreciate the stresses involved in a responsible position). The questionnaire was revised. It was reworded in an attempt to make it relevant to full-time learners with little or no work experience, and to those who were not in employment (though they may previously have had considerable employment experience as was the case with the senior learners). The original and amended versions are contained in Appendix F (original F3, amended versions F4-F8).

The questionnaire was reworded further to give the questions relevance to primary school learners, although as with all modification and scope expansion of questionnaires, care is needed when attempting to draw conclusions from any results obtained (see Appendix F5).

One limitation with this questionnaire was that there was no opportunity to pilot the questionnaire with a similar cohort of participants to provide a baseline spread of results.

It was difficult working with the questionnaires to accommodate the wide range of participant educational level, age and context. Repeated studies would prove the value of the questionnaires. As it stands, in a single study, they could only show a statistically

significant difference between the control group and the relevant P&SA participant group if there was a large and immediate effect, which is not expected. However, the data gathered should afford a useful baseline which could be used to track the current participants, if they were to participate in further P&SA trials, to ascertain the effect of continuing to carry out P&SA on their self-reliance. In addition, the baseline could be used for future work, particularly for monitoring the long-term effects of prolonged use of P&SA, tracking student cohorts through several or all educational levels.

*Readiness for Self-Directed Learning:* This inventory, used in Phase Two, had been developed in nursing education to measure the readiness of student nurses in third-level education to evaluate student readiness for self-directed learning: it had been trialled, and had a statistical track record (Fisher *et al*, 2001). As there are no subject-specific items in the questionnaire, and with good trial results, it was reasonable to assume that it could be applied to other categories of learners.

One *caveat* is that readiness for self-directed learning is predicated on both attitude and ability, hence a level of competence is required in the particular subject as well as the correct attitude before a student is 'ready' for self-directed learning. Thus, the results may be biased if a participant feels particularly competent (or incompetent): such feelings may only become apparent to the participant on conscious reflection and can be intensely personal, so they are feelings of which the researcher will not be aware.

A second *caveat* with using this questionnaire was that, in common with the *self-reliance* questionnaire, there was no opportunity to pilot it. It can be readily observed that most adults possess some measure of readiness for self-directed learning and lie somewhere along a continuum between needing teacher-led learning and self-directed learning.



Nevertheless, it was believed to be worthwhile to draw upon this inventory to compare the various learners with a known, well characterised cohort of tertiary-level students, to see whether there are significant differences between learners at different levels of education and from different populations with respect to age and background: this could at the very least form a baseline for further studies. Similar to the self-reliance inventory, it could be used to track the current cohorts of students should they continue to participate in further P&SA trials, to determine any consequent improvement in their readiness for self-directed learning. This baseline could also similarly aid future research, especially again monitoring the long-term effects of prolonged use of P&SA as student cohorts are tracked through the educational levels. This could confirm, or otherwise, the expectation that, in continuous use, the empowerment that goes with this method of assessment should strengthen student readiness for self-directed learning.

The questionnaire itself is designed around three sets of questions, aimed at evaluating the characteristics of *self management* (13 questions), *desire for learning* (14 questions) and *self control* (15 questions). The total set of 42 questions is answered on a 5-point Likert scale.

The readiness for self-directed learning questionnaire was considered to be impractical to revise for age appropriateness, as the questions assumed a level of life experience: it appeared appropriate to all participant cohorts, with the exception of the primary school learners. In discussion with the teacher this conviction was confirmed and the questionnaire was not given to the primary school learners.

### **3.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter has explored the research paradigms and methodologies, and the research methods which were understood to provide the best theoretical framework for

describing the research process in practice: the organising of studies, and gathering and analysing of data to produce credible research outcomes.

It explained the aim of drawing on the mixed method to take into account as many variables as possible to ensure balance between the academic, the practical and the relational sides of the investigation. For example, throughout several years it was necessary to meet, talk and listen to participants. Both formal and informal interaction and engagement was continuous and ongoing, but always within a formal academic context. The studies were structured around busy participants with already full schedules and with little time or patience for interruption or increases in work loads – this applied as much to me as to the participants. Much planning went into ensuring initial contacts with potential participants were amicable, to allow the research to be founded on solid interpersonal relationships; this groundwork helped to see the studies through to successful fruition while following Silverman's (2010: 41) counsel to 'treat your relations within the field as data'.

AR enabled a participatory, empowering and inclusive approach, in placing participants and researcher at the centre of the study. This sole method, however, was not considered sufficiently prescriptive in providing rigor. The systematic component of the constant comparison element of GT added stringency and this approach is shown to be compatible with AR. In addition, mixing research methods adds methodological triangulation to the research, which is explained in detail by Berg (2004: 5) who states that,

every method is a different line of sight directed toward the same point, observing social and symbolic reality. By combining several lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements. The use of multiple lines of sight is frequently called Triangulation.

In the internal studies, the exercising of philosophical and theoretical concepts was implicit in the *reflection* element of the research process. AR is a holistic approach, taking the researcher from the beginning through to the end of the research with one necessary judgment: it is an empirical approach which hinges on the decision “if I modify my practice will I achieve an improved outcome?”, and philosophy and theory are not considered further in the process. GT provided a systematic and visible way of interpreting the data obtained through the process of AR to build a resultant theory, a function which was continued throughout all the research. However, during Phase Two, with the change from AR confined to my practice, a flexible qualitative style of research was sought to take its place. As it was no longer my practice, with my experience, and suppositions implicit in the practice, and my experience and preconceptions included throughout the data, it was necessary to identify an approach which would allow for reflection on the relevance and implications of these factors. Phenomenology, with its added value of the *epoché* or bracketing to strip the phenomenon of the preconceived ideas of participant or researcher, suggested it as a suitable method with which to replace AR.

As the research evolved from AR into an IP approach, GT became the constant thread ensuring a consistent way of building a theory from the actual data gathered. This was complemented, first by AR for its reflective, participatory style, and improving my own practice, and then by IP, which maintained reflexivity and encouraged greater objectivity.

This chapter also covers an outline of why the participants were understood to provide the best sample to answer the research question. It situates the participants and describes their context. The process and flow of the studies are shown and the assessment design is provided.

The context of the data gathering is dealt with. The data gathering tools are described, and a rationale is provided to justify their adoption. In addition, there is also an account provided of the manner in which these research instruments were implemented.

## 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS I – PHASE ONE

*Motivation in learning is that compulsion which keeps a person within the learning situation and encourages him or her to learn.*

Rogers, 2002:87

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of the participant students who were undertaking an Education and Training Degree Programme.

The two classes of first and foundation year undergraduates of 2006/07 and 2007/08 included a total of 169 students. The learners completed questionnaire, including the IMI, shortly after finishing their project and assessment. It might seem a relatively easy task to engage students in completing a questionnaire, but the good will of students cannot be taken for granted: it takes a certain generosity and a commitment to the improvement of learning on the part of students to devote time and energy to the undertaking. First year is a time of transition and it is a time when many students have to make many personal, family, work and academic adjustments in order to settle into higher education. There is the draw on time needed to attend lectures, to study and to carry out research, which are all necessary parts in the preparation for and completion of assessments. These factors can serve to make first year a particularly busy time for students and a further reason to value their input into the research.

#### 4.1.1 THE STUDIES

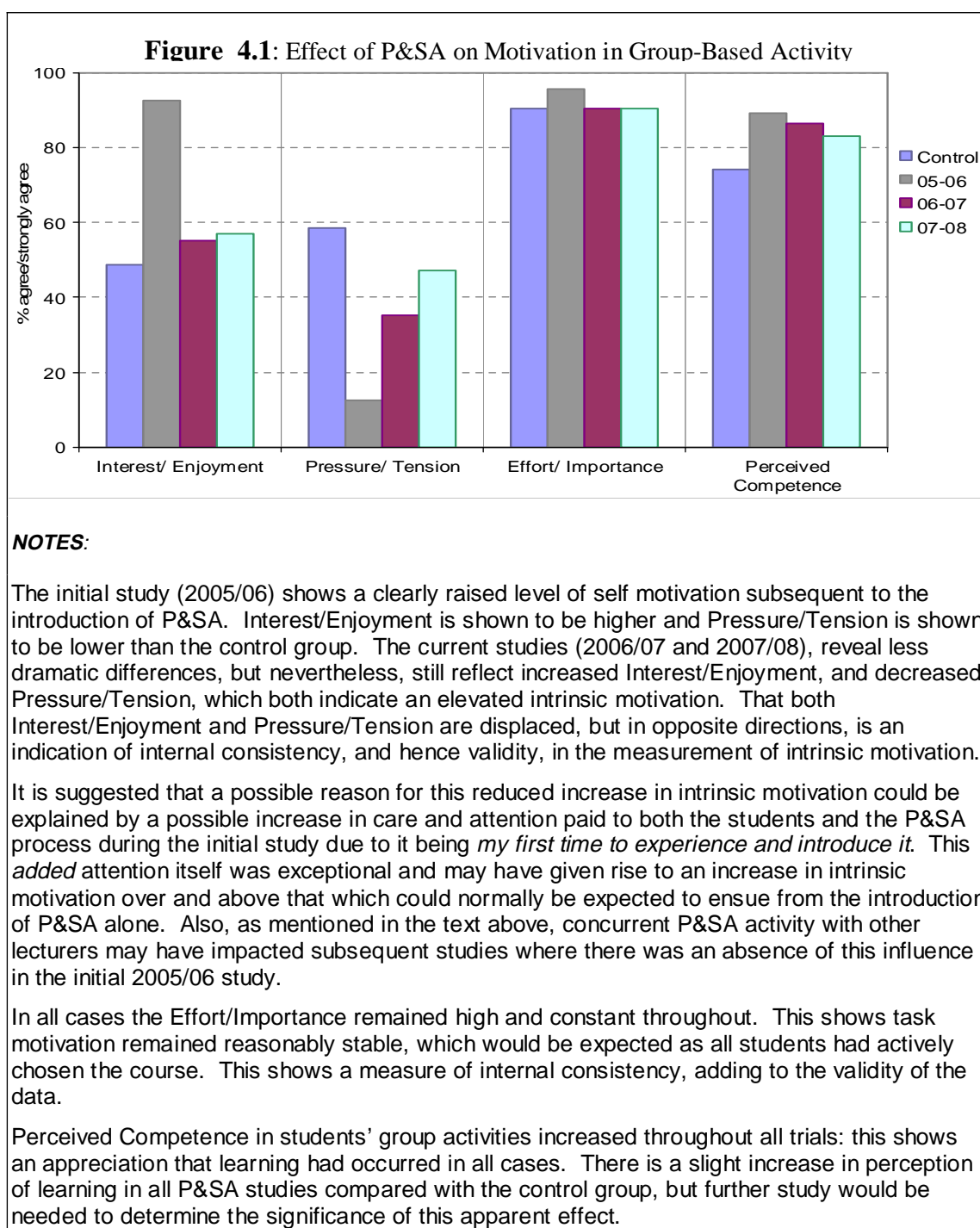
The questionnaires the students in the two classes were invited to fill in consisted of closed questions (the IMI) and open questions (to allow them to voice their views on how the assessment affected them and their points of view on group-based learning

activities). The overall response rates to the questionnaires were 53% for the closed questions (66% in 2006/07 and 43% in 2007/08) and 44% for the open questions (58% in 2006/07 and 34% in 2007/08).

There is no direct, obvious answer to why the students in 2006/07 yielded a higher rate of return of completed questionnaires, or why a higher proportion responded to the open questions than did the students in 2007/08. A possible reason for variance in the response rates may have been due to various complex factors. In the year 2006/07, the students collectively completed the questionnaires in my presence, which meant I was on hand if any issues were raised (there were no issues raised). In 2007/08 due to pressure of time, another lecturer agreed to hand out and to collect the completed questionnaires from students. (The completion of questionnaires in the initial 2005/06 study and again in 2006/07 was concluded without difficulty, making this a reasonable action to take). In 2007/08, the completion appeared straightforward, but disparities appeared in the responses, which appeared to suggest that some students may have confused the P&SA carried out with me (a group presentation) with a form of P&SA conducted by another teacher, who had commenced using this form of assessment. It seemed that a small number of students who completed the questionnaires directed comments aimed specifically at this other teacher's format of P&SA (a written assignment, and marked openly by peers in the class). As far as comments could be attributed to the form of P&SA used in the current trials, all comments were included in the analysis, as were all results of the IMI. Notwithstanding these points, the questionnaires completed were clear in their message and proved straightforward in generating findings.

#### *4.1.2 OVERARCHING FINDING*

Phase One of the research sought to determine if P&SA could improve students' motivation within a group-based context. The overarching finding, arising out of the 2006/07 and 2007/08 studies, informs that P&SA impacts positively on learner motivation within a team-based context. This finding, illustrated in Figure 4.1, is shown to be in line with and corroborates the research finding of the initial study, carried out in 2005/06 which determined students' motivation could be improved by the introduction of P&SA into group-based activity. This finding that P&SA can contribute to the improvement of student motivation and enjoyment in group-based activities is also in line with Bryan (2006) and the literature review findings described in Chapter 2.



Source: Researcher

It is interesting to note that when the open questions relating to P&SA on the questionnaire were analysed, the students, while appearing to make similar types of comment, attributed different weight to different areas. For example, as outlined in Figures, 4.12 (2006/07) and 4.13 (2007/08), the findings from the open questions in relation to students carrying out P&SA in 2006/07 emphasised motivation, where 49%



of students' comments were directed towards motivation compared with 12% making similar comments in the following year. In contrast, the 2007/08 students, while still reflecting the motivating factor, commented more on the fairness of the assessment, with 36% of students expressing P&SA to be fair, which compares with 21% who commented on it being fair in the prior year. Figure 4.11 shows that a re-analysis (for comparison with the current studies) of the initial (2005/06) study depicts 55% of students commenting on the fairness of P&SA, and 21% on the motivational aspect of the assessment.

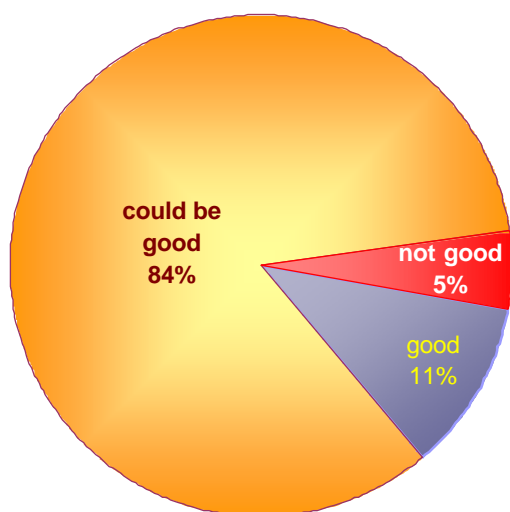
The total student responses to the open questions included in the questionnaire are illustrated below in Figures 4.2 to 4.13. Student responses to the question, "What do you think of group work as a teaching methodology?" are detailed in Figures, 4.2 to 4.6. These are analysed in two categories to provide a measure of triangulation. In Figures 4.2 to 4.5, the number of students who thought that group work was 'good', or 'could be good' or was 'not good' as a teaching methodology are shown as a percentage of the number who expressed such an opinion.

When analysed into the percentages who thought group work 'good', 'could be good' or 'not good', the responses from the initial **control group**, with the absence of P&SA in the year 2005/06 are outlined in Figure 4.2 while the responses from students in the initial **P&SA study group**, 2005/06, are outlined in Figure 4.3. The students' responses to the same question for the current 2006/07 and 2007/08 studies are detailed in Figures 4.4 and Figure 4.5 respectively.

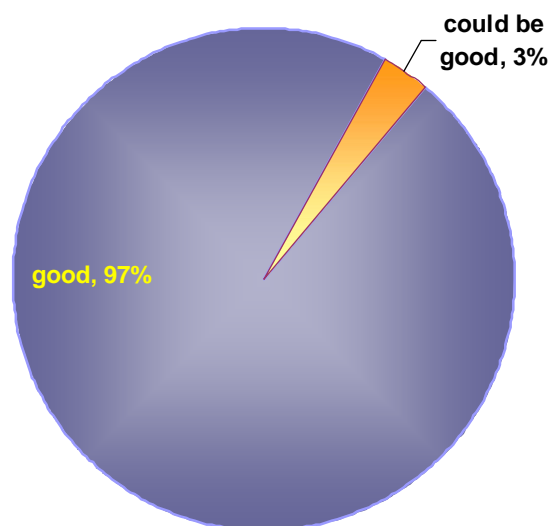
Overall, the response to this question from all of the P&SA studies as outlined in Figures 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 would indicate that, with the addition of P&SA, the majority of students think group-based activity is a good teaching methodology. This compares

favourably to the findings drawn from the control group, Figure 4.2, which suggests that only 11% of students thought it was a *good* methodology compared to 84% of students who thought that it *could be good*.

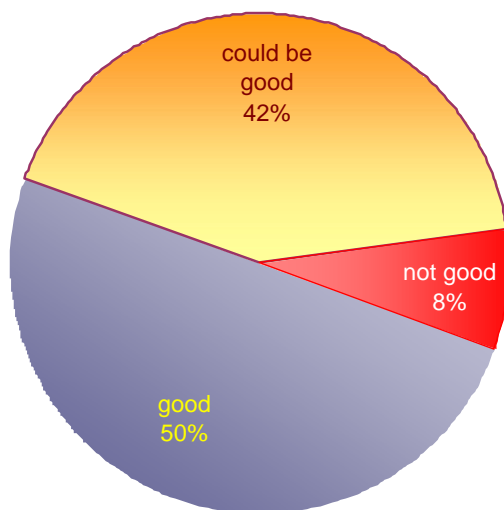
**Figure 4.2:** responses of students in the **original control group** on their views of group work as a teaching methodology



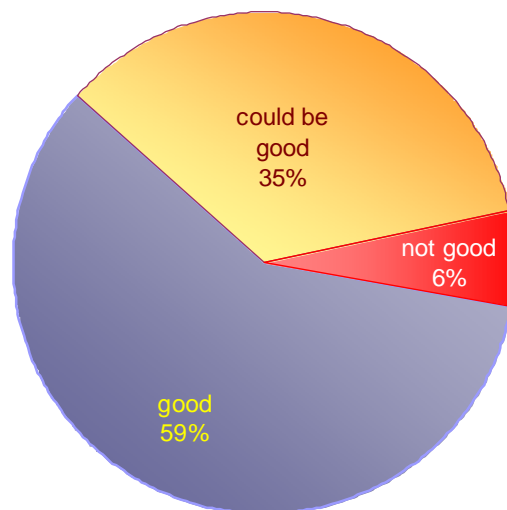
**Figure 4.3:** responses of students in the **initial P&SA study group (2005/06)** on their views of group work as a teaching methodology



**Figure 4.4:** responses of students in the **P&SA study group of 2006/07** on their views of group work as a teaching methodology

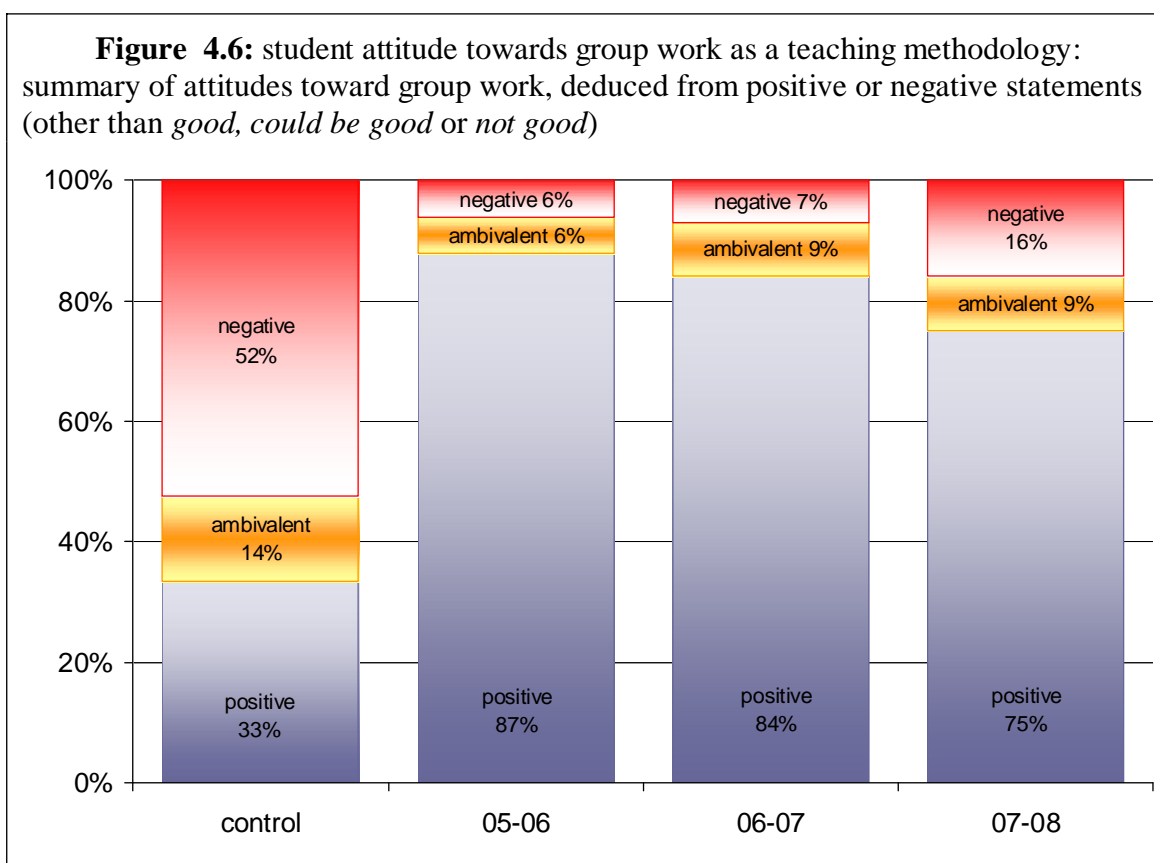


**Figure 4.5:** responses of students in the **P&SA study group of 2007/08** on their views of group work as a teaching methodology



As a form of triangulation, Figure 4.6 depicts student attitudes towards group-based work as a teaching methodology as deduced from the views expressed. These responses are presented as a percentage of those who expressed an opinion. The overall opinions of each student were analysed as positive or negative depending on whether the clear

majority of comments were supportive or otherwise of group-based activity as a teaching methodology; students who expressed both positive and negative opinions are listed as ambivalent. These numbers are expressed as a percentage of the questionnaires returned expressing an opinion on group-based work. Although the numbers (naturally) differ, as the information has been collected in dissimilar ways, and shows expressions of different types of feelings toward group-based activities, the correlation is unmistakable – a dramatic difference in the positive view of this methodology is shown in both analyses of the student responses.



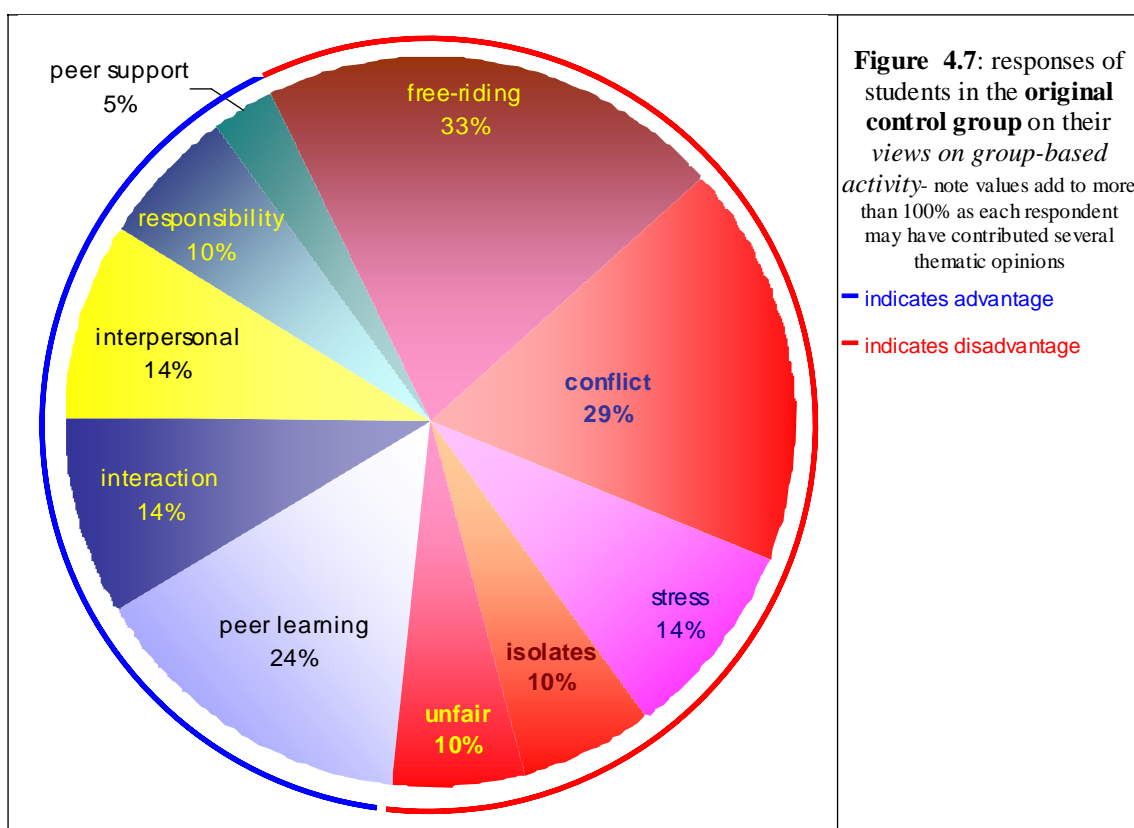
Figures 4.7 to 4.10 provide outlines of the ways in which the students perceived group-based activity to have been an advantage or disadvantage to them. The resultant themes are presented as a percentage of students who expressed an opinion, thus, ‘scores’ add to more than one hundred percent, as each student may have expressed several opinions. Starting with the **control group**, in the absence of P&SA, the findings outlined in

Figure 4.7 detail an unmistakable degree of negative comments. Students registered an overall high level of discontent, reflected in the form of free-riding (social loafing) (33% of comments), conflict (29% of comments), stress (14% of comments) feelings of isolation (10% of comments) and a feeling of unfairness (10% of comments). The advantages were given as peer learning (24% of comments), improved interaction (14% of comments), improved interpersonal skills (14% of comments), increased sense of responsibility (10% of comments) with peer support also being mentioned.

It is clear from Figure 4.8, which details the findings of the initial study group, 2005/06, with the inclusion of P&SA, that while there is still an element of dissatisfaction, categorised as free-riding, stress, group disquiet and increased workload, is was observed to a much lesser degree. It was noted that the advantages greatly outweighed the disadvantages. These advantages were reported as: learning from peers and appreciating others' points of view (88% of comments), improved interactivity (74% of comments), increased level of motivation (41% of comments), confidence building (32% of comments), support and reduced pressure (26% of comments), improved self-awareness (15% of comments), usefulness for future career (12% of comments) with comments that it fostered teamwork, responsibility and improved communication skills.

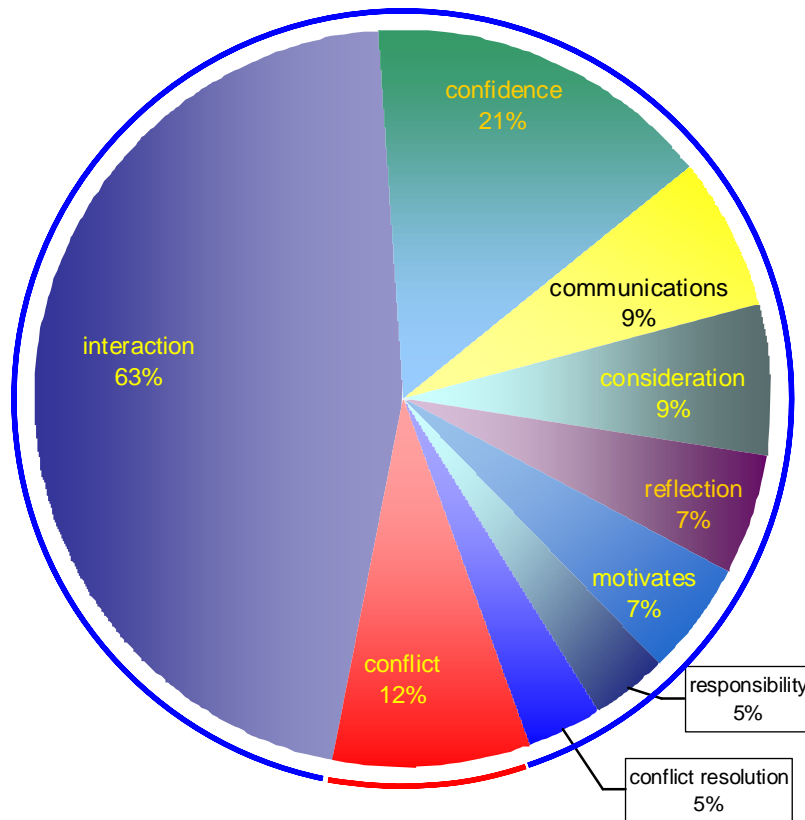
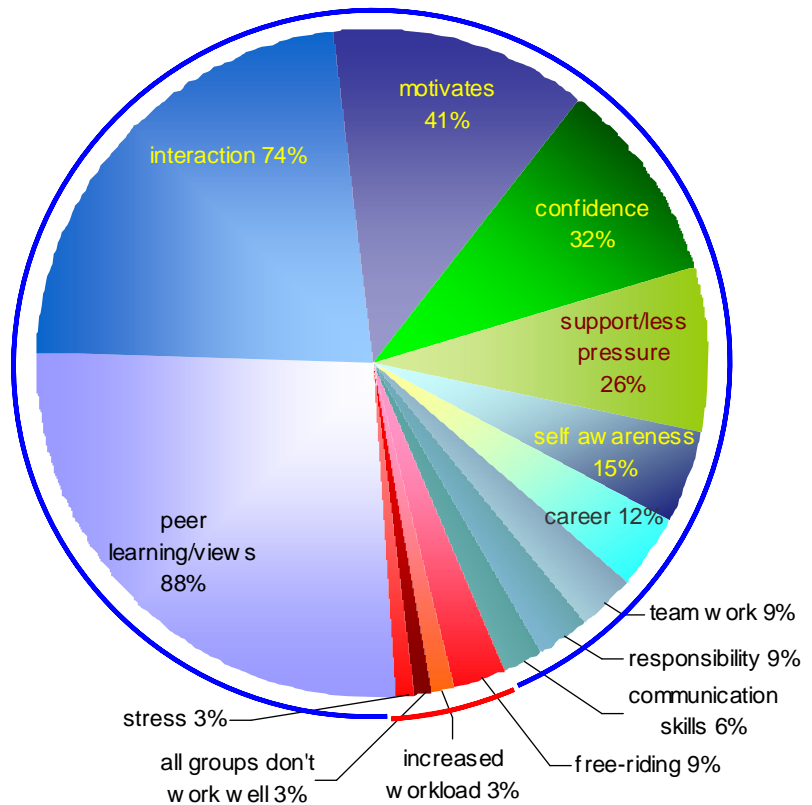
The students' responses from the current 2006/07 and 2007/08 studies are outlined in Figures 4.9 and 4.10. Compared to the control group (Figure 4.7), both current studies also show a lower degree of dissatisfaction, with 12% of comments in 2006/07 relating to conflict issues within the group: as a counterpoint to this, 5% of comments reported a benefit in the form of conflict resolution. The findings in 2007/08 show students perceived a degree of social loafing (19% of comments) and a difficulty in relying on group members (9% of comments). In both years there was a high degree of perceived advantages. The main advantages in 2006/07 were reported as improved interaction

(63% of comments), confidence building (21% of comments), increased communication skills (9% of comments) appreciation and consideration of others (9% of comments) with comments on reflection, motivation and responsibility for own learning also being mentioned. In 2007/08 students considered the principal advantages to be: improved interaction (38% of comments), peer learning (19% of comments), increased motivation (13% of comments), confidence building (9% of comments) with comments that it lessens stress and helps with new skills.



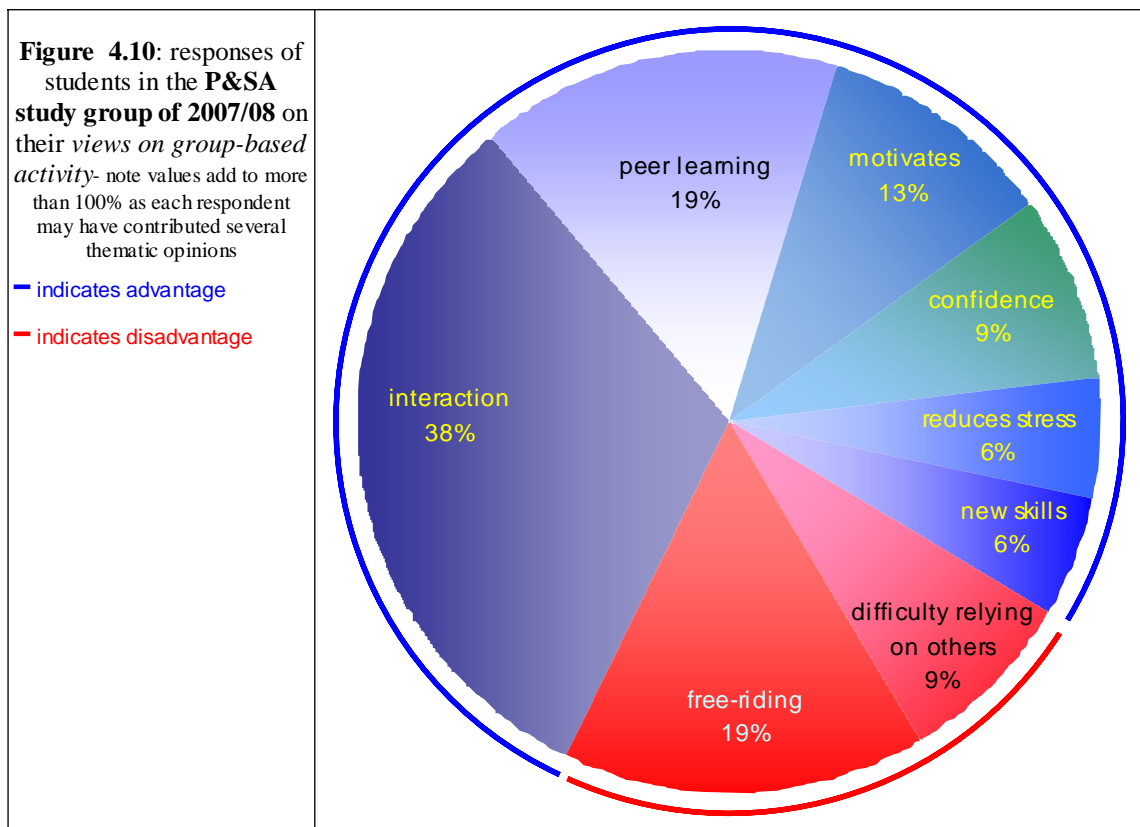
**Figure 4.8:** responses of students in the **initial P&SA study group** on their *views on group-based activity*- note values add to more than 100% as each respondent may have contributed several thematic opinions

— indicates advantage  
— indicates disadvantage



**Figure 4.9:** responses of students in the **P&SA study group of 2006/07** on their *views on group-based activity*- note values add to more than 100% as each respondent may have contributed several thematic opinions

— indicates advantage  
— indicates disadvantage

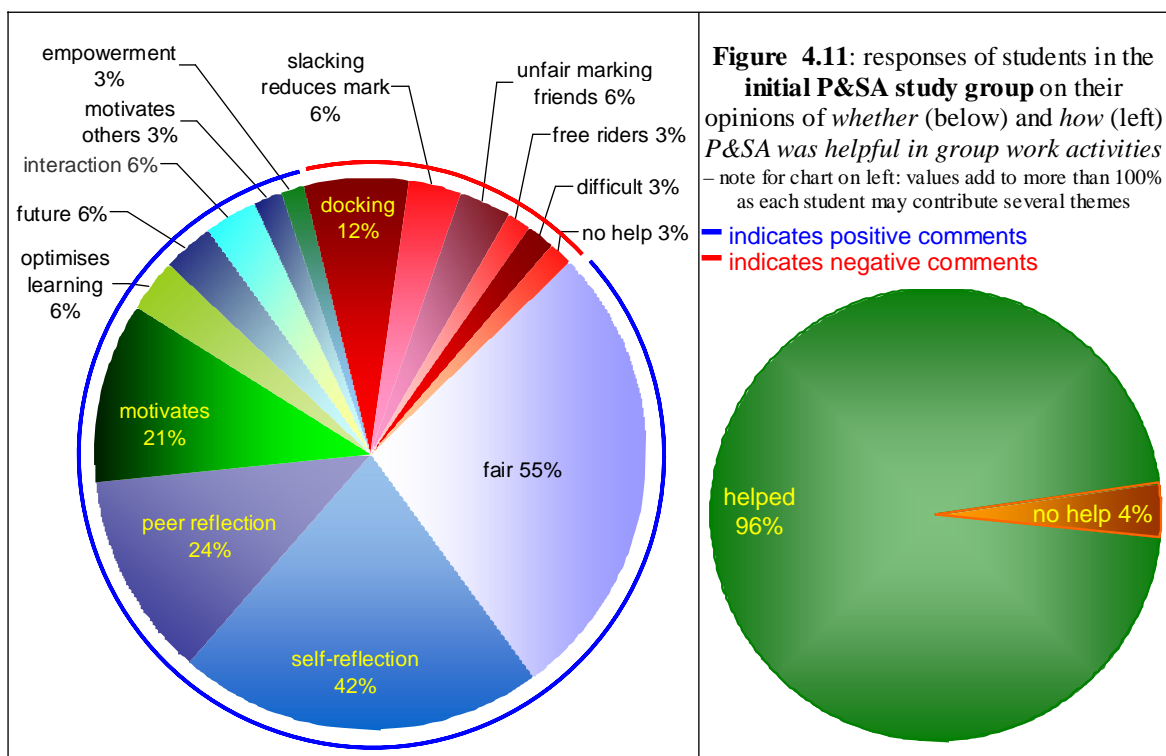


Figures 4.11 to 4.13 details the views of students on how they perceived P&SA to have been of help to them in their group-based activity. The resultant themes were deduced from answers to open questions, included on the questionnaire, on whether P&SA helped and how it helped. The themes which appeared are presented as a percentage of students who expressed an opinion (thus 'scores' add to more than 100%, as each student may have expressed several opinions). There is a clear indication that students perceived P&SA to have helped them, with over 88% commenting that it was helpful.

The findings demonstrate the many ways students perceived P&SA to be beneficial. The overall assessment of group-based activity by peers and self is considered by the students in the current studies to be: fair, promote reflection on self and peers, improve motivation and foster co-operation, with confidence building also being mentioned (Figures 4.12 and 4.13). These findings are in line with the initial study (Figure 4.11). When the initial study comments were re-analysed for comparison, similar major

benefits were noted, with additional benefits of empowerment and optimisation of learning, with students also perceiving P&SA as an important future skill.

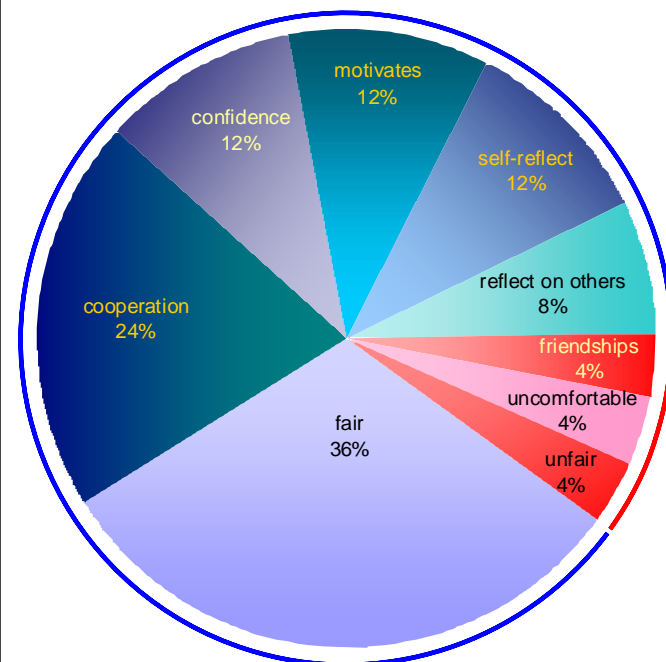
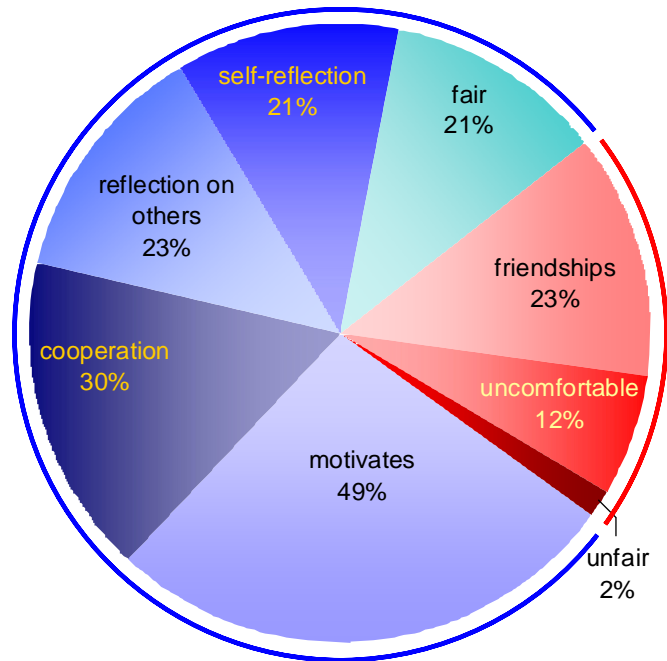
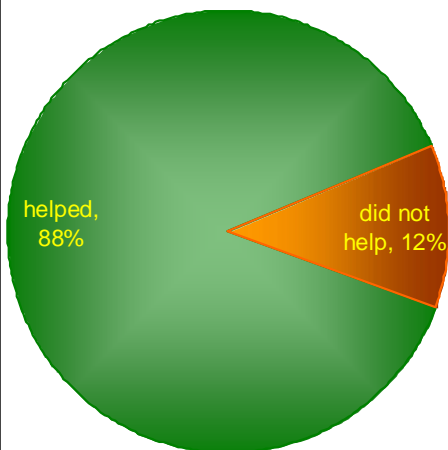
Drawbacks perceived by students in the current studies include: marking influenced by friendships or relationships, discomfort in marking self and others and a degree of unfairness. It is interesting to note that while the students in the initial study (2005/06) had seen that marking was limited to docking marks from others in the group, marking was reduced by ‘slackers’, the marking was difficult or no help, and free-riders were still problems, none of this was remarked on in the current 2006/07 and 2007/08 studies.





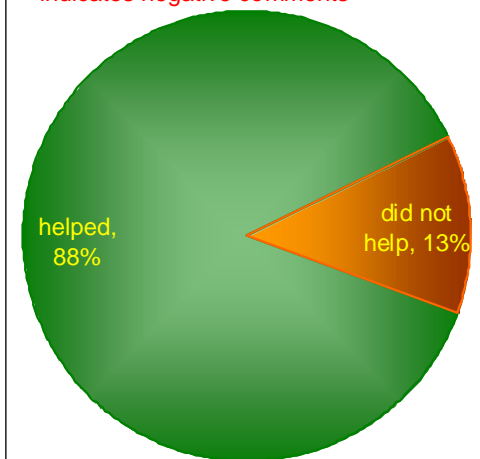
**Figure 4.12:** responses of students in the 2006/07 P&SA study group on their opinions of *whether* (below) and *how* (right) P&SA was helpful in group work activities – note for chart on right: values add to more than 100% as each student may contribute several themes

— indicates positive comments  
— indicates negative comments



**Figure 4.13:** responses of students in the 2007/08 P&SA study group on their opinions of *whether* (below) and *how* (left) P&SA was helpful in group work activities – note for chart on right: values add to more than 100% as each student may contribute several themes

— indicates positive comments  
— indicates negative comments



Own observations would corroborate these findings. During the time of the 2006/07 and 2007/08 studies there was an absence of issues during both semesters. At no time during the P&SA process was an issue brought to my attention. The larger class numbers, while appearing to underpin the versatility of this assessment practice, could

at the same time raise a question about the possible difficulty or hesitation on the part of students to voice any issue or to have their voice heard. However, although in both cases the class size was larger (see Table 1.3, Chapter 1), making it more difficult to engage with all of the students at an individual level, they still had ample opportunity and freedom to communicate any perceived issue by electronic means or by paying a personal visit to the office to voice their concern. It is important to note also that during both studies there was never a case of where a student appealed her/his grade. The same observation is evidenced in the initial 2005/06 study by the then programme co-ordinator (Staff Member 1) who reported:

*The students have recently had feedback on their assignments which included the self-assessment and the peer-assessment elements and I've had queries from other modules, but I've had no queries back from that module, which leads me to believe that the students are quite content with the process that they went through, which would lead me to believe that they're motivated . . .*

It is important to note that had there been any question of an issue raised by students it would not have gone unnoticed. Learners have a collective presence, and normally have a class representative, as did all of the study classes. Class representatives can (and do) voice views that an individual student might be unwilling to express personally, whether through shyness, embarrassment or an unwillingness to stand out. That there was an absence of issues demonstrates that the initial starting point for students was, and continued to be a satisfactory one.

## **4.2 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter has provided a detailed outline of the overarching finding of the 2006/07 and 2007/08 studies which were conducted in Phase One of the research. It outlines the clear overall finding, which indicates that the practice of P&SA is perceived to impact

positively on student motivation when introduced into group-based activity. This finding is shown to be in line with and to corroborate the findings of the initial 2005/06 study. It is also in line with Fawcett (2005) (see Table 2.6, Chapter 2) who reported increased student motivation, within a similar group-based presentation context. She attributed this finding to students being involved in their own evaluation where they could clarify any issues they may have had and students seeking to impress each other.

Also, detailed in this chapter are the principal ways in which Education and Training undergraduate students judged P&SA to have helped them during their collective project. The students' impression of their experience of group-based activity as a learning and teaching strategy is presented, and an account illustrating how these undergraduate students perceived P&SA to have been of assistance to them during the life of their group project is given.

In addition, the chapter allows a comparison to be made between the findings of the **control group** study (2005/06), the initial study (2005/06, which has been re-analysed for this purpose) and the subsequent studies carried out with two separate cohorts of Education and Training undergraduate students in 2006/07 and 2007/08. With the **exception** of the control group study, all students partnered the teacher through the process of P&SA. In the case of the control group, the students did not have an input into the assessment process and the teacher awarded a common mark to each group, regardless of individual work contribution.

## 5 RESEARCH FINDINGS II – PHASE TWO: TEACHERS AND CO-ORDINATORS

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

*We professional adult educators have a commitment to help learners become more imaginative, intuitive, and critically reflective of assumptions; to become more rational through effective participation in critical discourse; and to acquire meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, integrative, discriminating, and open to alternative points of view. By doing this we may help others, and perhaps ourselves, move toward a fuller and more dependable understanding of the meaning of our mutual experience.*

Mezirow (1991: 224)

This chapter outlines and examines the key findings which emerged from the teachers and co-ordinators who participated in the research.

From the outset each teacher appeared enthusiastic to share the assessment procedure with the students: they all seemed keen to see if and how the process would work. The primary and the urban secondary schools were girls-only schools; the others were of mixed gender. The studies operated smoothly with the sole exception of that for the early school leavers: new students start at varying times throughout the year, making continuity difficult both for the teacher and for those students present from the beginning; nevertheless, the teacher and students persevered.

The common thread throughout the studies was the teacher. In each case I relied on the teacher to facilitate the process and it was the teacher upon whom demands were made. Living this experience, their impressions of, reactions to and analysis of the P&SA student-teacher partnership approach forms a prominent part of the research findings in this chapter. Where it appeared appropriate in the light of their close involvement with the project, the programme co-ordinators were also invited to give an account of their experiences and observations in the form of an interview.

All of the teachers, with the exception of the teacher of the senior learner rural students, Teacher D., provided interviews: the senior learner rural programme was new, and the teacher's timetable was already stretched to accommodate the study. These senior learners were new to the teacher and to the centre, which meant care had to be taken to ensure relationships, class content and pace did not subject the learners to any undue distress, and time was given to meeting these needs. The invitation to the teacher to provide an interview was declined due to time constraints, but to compensate, the Co-ordinator of the programme (Co-ordinator K), who had been present from the outset of the study, accepted the invitation to be interviewed in lieu of the teacher. As well as his role as co-ordinator of the senior learner programme, he was also the co-ordinator of the second-level rural community school transition-year programme which was participating in a study. Due to this close association with both groups of students, he referred to both studies and both sets of students during his interview. It is also to be noted that Teacher J., from his perspective as a student experiencing P&SA for the first time in higher education (referred to as Student 49), also offers views from the standpoint of a learner, in Chapter 6, Section 6.3.5.

The co-ordinators of the senior learner urban and early school leaver programmes, who were closely involved with the respective studies in their centres, also provided interviews.

All teachers, including myself and the senior learner teacher who was not in a position to take part in the interview, had become involved in the research in an attempt to improve the *quality of learning* for learners. However, there was an implicit understanding that the research could not be allowed to interfere with the learners' current quality of learning. With this delimitation, participation was voluntary and remained so to the end. No attempt was made to coerce participants, which reflected

the belief that causing any single participant duress could have unduly clouded the integrity of the studies.

It would undoubtedly have constituted a more generalisable sample if a larger number of teachers and students had participated in the research, or if a greater number of studies had been conducted at each educational level. Despite strenuous attempts to steer the research by forward planning, the reality was that the direction of the studies was shaped by what was feasible. To help answer the research question *(a) to what extent can P&SA, within a group-based learning context, sustain all lifelong learners; and (b) within the same context, can P&SA increase learner motivation, engender self-efficacy, and facilitate a sense of self-direction?*, it was considered more practical to simultaneously explore the views of participants across the educational spectrum as opposed to carrying out multiple studies at fewer educational levels. Availability of participants, time and resources was a dominant force in determining the scale of what could be encompassed in the studies. That said, following due diligence, this outlook presented itself as an appropriate means of satisfying the research question.

The decision to attempt the broad overview was embedded in a constructivist approach. Prior experience informed that there was a depth of knowledge and experience already developed as a result of the findings of the initial 2005/06 P&SA research study. This context provided a scaffold which supported further investigation. Without this background of research it would have proved more challenging to simultaneously explore the educational levels, and may have resulted in adopting a more conservative, safer, one study at a time approach. It was believed this background provided a secure scaffold for continuing the exploration into Phase One of the studies; the additional experience of Phase One then added to the structure supporting the subsequent expansion into Phase Two with primary, second-level schools, early school leavers and

senior learners in further education, and with the final-year undergraduate students in tertiary education. However, it is in order to specify the particular support given to the decision to proceed with the broad view, both from prior experience and from field observation, and this was located in the following ongoing data:

- Phase One studies, initiated in higher education, disclosed an absence of challenges to the assessment practice and a similar absence of appeals from students.
- Phase Two study initiation suggested that there was sufficient strength in the initial preparatory fieldwork, observations and feedback to indicate that the teachers and students were willing to participate in the studies.
- Ongoing field observations and feedback from external (Phase Two) students and teachers showed no evidence of any issue or objection raised to the research process, and there was no request from teacher or student to withdraw from the P&SA. This in itself suggested a positive learning (and research) climate.
- Ongoing field observations and feedback from both Phase One and Phase Two studies proved in alignment with findings of wider P&SA studies reported in the literature.

It must be acknowledged that further research is required to corroborate the findings of this research: an in-depth exploration at each educational level will serve to provide more confidence in generalisation of the findings. Notwithstanding this requirement, the findings from these research trials demonstrate that teachers and students at each educational level appear in unison in their outlook and experience of P&SA.

Furthermore, emergent themes which appear common to all studies conducted during the research are reflective of the wider educational community, as illustrated in the current review of the literature, outlined in Chapter 2.

As described in Chapter 3, I relied on data collected through semi-structured interviews to maintain an IP approach: the semi-structured approach allowed teachers to not only recount their stories, but prompted purposeful *reflection* on the meaning of their experience, thus yielding the richer quality of data needed to produce credible findings. This approach, and belief, is also pursued in Chapter 6, which provides a report of the student findings.

The teachers' and co-ordinators' views have been summarised, drawing out the resultant common themes, and are portrayed in the matrices Table 5.1 below and Table 5.2 (see Section 5.4). The findings are reported in an academic style, which tends to lean away from the personal: the selected citations from participants redress the balance. Maykut and Morehouse (1994: 161) support this view when they assert out that 'much qualitative research focuses on people's words, their thoughts, their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences that can come to life when their words are read aloud'.

For ease of reading, the findings are presented in the following order: primary school, secondary level schools and higher education in mainstream education, and further education.

Please note that where reference is made to *student(s)* or *learner(s)*, both terms are used flexibly and interchangeably, and there is no distinguishable difference in level or status intended.

Finally, findings cannot be reported in isolation. To avoid stripping the teachers' and co-ordinators' findings from their surroundings, they are presented against a brief conceptual background, which describes the commonly perceived *relational* aspect of the teacher, learning and assessment context.



## 5.2 LEARNER-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

The learner-teacher relationship is paramount to learning. Fox (1993) argues that the teacher is a principal influence in shaping learner self-concept, suggesting the classroom experience can play a pivotal role in shaping the learner's sense of self. Gipps (1994: 132) focuses on assessment, drawing attention to the learner's vulnerability in the classroom as she maintains that 'as far as academic self-esteem is concerned, teachers' evaluations are most crucial, particularly in the early years of schooling'. She argues that if learners see themselves in a positive light they will be more resilient, put more effort in, remain determined for a greater duration in the face of obstacles and ultimately take greater advantage from the learning situation. Clearly self-concept impacts the learner's decision-making ability and her/his ability to develop a sense of self-reliance and self-direction, essential components for the lifelong learner.

The assessment of student learning outcomes has traditionally fallen to the teacher or examiner. Biggs (1999: 157) recognises this *custom* or *habit* when he declares that assessment involves three processes: setting the criteria, selecting the evidence and judging how well the criteria have been met. He concludes, that 'traditionally, the teacher is the agent in all three assessment issues'. The Department of Education and Science (1995: 30) supports this custom as it discusses the teacher's role in assessment in primary education, explaining that

most teachers currently assess their students' progress, mainly in the cognitive areas. Assessment practice ranges from observation, classroom discussions and homework to the use of standardised tests, both norm- and criterion-referenced.

Ten years on, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) published guidelines supporting cultural diversity in primary schools. Here again, when it comes to assessment, the teacher is centre-stage, as the guidelines state, 'any assessment tool

does no more than provide information, which then must be interpreted by the teacher' (NCCA, 2005: 153). The guidelines also describe the significance of the relationship between teacher, assessment and learner, stating, 'if the assessment experience is positive the child will develop a sense that the teacher is someone who is interested in what he/she can do and the child will be affirmed in her/his learning and development' (NCCA, 2005: 152). It trusts that the teacher will measure up to the task of ensuring the assessment experience is positive *always* for every learner. It perpetuates a *teacher-centred* style of assessment, fixing in the mind of the learner a *teacher-in-charge* mentality.

### 5.3 TEACHERS' VIEWS

Table 5.1 provides a summation of teacher responses as elicited from their interviews.

A more detailed account is also provided in subsequent sections, which draws on the teachers own *voices*.

**Table 5.1: Emergent themes – teachers**

	Concerns					Consensus					Benefits														
	Heavy workload/no time					x																			
	Can judge severely																								
	Groups can agree marking beforehand					x																			
	Some do not like group work																								
	Need set standards (for comparison, for job qualification)																								
Self							x																		
A								x																	
B									x																
C										x															
D											x														
E																									
F																									
G																									
H																									
I																									
J																									
TOTAL	1	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

† Said it depends on the student: could be Primary, but could be older  
 ‡ 2 expressed no opinion, but wanted it developed in a wider format or scope  
 \* Majority (9) said Primary (of those, 1 said Primary or Secondary, 1 said conditionally Primary)

### 5.3.1 PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

In the primary school, Teacher C. had been teaching for forty years and was close to retirement when we started the research (she retired the week the research was completed). Throughout the process she was very involved with the girls, ensuring the process ran smoothly, but she stressed at all times throughout the study that she did not inflict her views on the students nor coach them in how to behave: the students were free to speak out and to act as they felt necessary to get their work and assessment finished.

C. appeared to have a truly multicultural blend of students from Ireland, Europe, Africa and Asia. She spoke of being impressed by the impact of the P&SA on the students' co-operation with each other, saying,

*It is very worthwhile. One of the students had difficulty and sometimes the penny never drops, but the girls in her group have been so kind to her. I have never seen that before.*

During the interview, when C. was asked if she thought the girls understood what they were doing in carrying out P&SA, she replied '*Yes, I do, I do*'.

She felt that P&SA could be introduced from the beginning of primary school and said,

*. . . this particular age group is a very good age group [ten and eleven years old] for it because . . . they've had the experience of the junior, then they come to this section and then they're heading on into the senior section, so it is something that would be very good for them to know that they can avail of and use themselves as they go on.*

When the students had conducted their assessment, C. looked at the completed result sheets, remarking '*They have good judgement. I would agreed with that* [their marks]'.

However, when C. was discussing the marks at a later stage she added the caveat that this was not an average class as she said

*I was very pleased with their judgement, but I have to say that their judgement, at this age level would be superior to a lot of what I would have seen.*

However, she did say that, in general, she found children's judgement '*very severe, accurate but very severe, not tempered by experience*'.

C. spoke of how she observed the girls excitement as they worked on their project and how they enjoyed being able to assess themselves and each other. She commented that the students '*exchanged information in a way that they wouldn't have been doing up to that*'.

She also noticed during the study that some of the children were able to direct themselves towards books that were '*very unattractive to look at with no colour*' but they still '*read little bits here and there and gained information*' for their environmental project, which she felt added to the quality of the work and was good research for children of '*ten and eleven years of age*'.

She said '*I found it great to be able just to let them do it in their own way and trust them to be able to do the work that was necessary and produce the goods at the end of the day*'. She felt P&SA was a key influence in how the girls interacted as they worked together to complete their project. She believed that this was because

*They [students] knew they were on the line – they were on the line from themselves, it wasn't a matter of 'she said at the top', so therefore it meant more to them. While the project was in progress there was more interactivity between students – no doubt about it.*

If she had been continuing on with teaching, C. believed she would have carried on with P&SA *'to see how it would work with different groups'*. She felt the current study enabled the students *'to think more about their efforts: did I do my best? If I didn't, well it's something I can learn from and it's something I must be on the look out for again, you know'*.

During the interview C. spoke of how honest she thought the girls had been with the assessment. She considered *'They were pretty honest all the way. Maybe a little bit harsh at times. I feel at this stage their judgement is totally unadulterated'*.

Although the teacher was satisfied that the *'advantages [P&SA] would certainly outweigh disadvantages greatly'*, she acknowledged that there would be a *'lot of hard work on the person guiding'* [the assessment].

### 5.3.2 SECOND-LEVEL EDUCATION

Two teachers participated in the studies in second-level, both teaching transition year.

A. teaches in an urban, girls-only secondary school, while B. works in a rural community school. During the course of the study, Teacher A. spoke about it being good for her personally. She remarked *'I always have to tell the students what to do. I did not realise I did so much to show the students everything and tell them what to do'*.

B., who had said she also invested a considerable amount of time helping her students, said *'... this is the first time I left the work entirely to the group. I have learned to step back from the group; I couldn't get involved in their delegation, in the work that they have produced. It is very important that the students in transition year get a chance to work independently of teacher so it is not teacher-directed learning.'*

## Urban Secondary School

Teacher A. spoke on the outcome of the study and said *'I've learned an awful lot from it [P&SA] that could be used at a secondary level'*. She also reported that *'Feedback from the girls has been very positive. You know, I think it's highlighted to them where their strengths and weaknesses are . . . it would be a great advantage to start this in second-level'*. Commenting on the potential to break down barriers, she said she felt she had to be more aware of herself because what the girls were doing [P&SA] was *'adult'* and that *'when I was talking to them I had to bear that in mind'*.

In relation to how directed the students were in their work, she said *'I've seen how the girls have worked. They've taken it very seriously. They've pushed themselves, you know. Some of them wouldn't, they would have sat back and I mean it was, obvious, you know'*. She spoke of observing a change in how the girls behaved and communicated with each other, saying,

*I think girls, who may have probably sat back and let the leaders take charge, actually did a lot more than they would have done and interacted and made their voice heard as opposed to just sitting there.*

She also considered P&SA would encourage her students to work

*. . . more independently [and it had] proved to them that they've gotta take full responsibility for their work and you know they'll reap the rewards.*

When it came to the question of how honest she thought the girls had been in carrying out their assessment, she said *'I think they were very honest'*. She thought the students felt they could be honest because *'they didn't have to sign their name. The ball was in their court'*.

Teacher A. made no comment on disadvantages encountered with P&SA, but acknowledged it was her first experience. She considered that one reason for this lack of drawbacks could be attributed to the students being free to set their own criteria.

She considered P&SA appropriate for children of a young age, stating, '*obviously you change the language to suit the age of the children that are in front of you*'. She ended with the comment '*if this is introduced they'll know no different, and it's what they will be taught from the beginning*'.

### Community School

Teacher B's views bore a certain similarity to those of Teacher A. in the urban secondary school as she described her observations, commenting,

*I would totally recommend it [P&SA] and I said it to the transition year co-ordinator here and we might introduce it because it gave them . . . I think it helped them mature. It gave them responsibility. They had to produce their work to their own peer group and they had to take responsibility to have the work done to the best of their ability, they had to work independently on their own, it wasn't coming from a teacher telling them to do it, so they had total ownership over it.*

She went on to say how it could improve some students' motivation by explaining,

*It [P&SA] gives ownership to the students. It creates awareness among the students of their own individual performance and the importance that that makes to the team and that it will affect their mark as well themselves, their performance will be assessed by their peers and the mark that the teacher gives for the overall product may not be the mark that they get because their own peers will know whether they put in the work or not.*

When it came to the question of students speaking out, B. encountered a different result with her class. She found '*the leaders emerged more quickly and stronger leadership was evident in the group*'. She considered the strong leaders in the group appeared to



be more confident, but the *‘quieter students submerged into the background’*.

However, she considered this as a learning curve for these students, as she remarked

*I think the ones that didn't speak out, like maybe they should have learned from that experience that perhaps they lost out. So if it was to happen again I think they would be more aware of it and would have the confidence to say, "I am not going to let this happen again, I am going to speak out this time".*

Another point made by B. raised a concern that it was possible a weaker student may put in greater effort than a more able student, which peers might not acknowledge in the assessment. She said *‘I don't know if they have the maturity to gauge that yet, so a weaker student might just suffer’*. However, as mentioned above, Teacher C. evidenced kindness being shown to a weaker student at primary level, from which it is reasonable to infer that children of a much younger age are capable of this level of maturity and understanding.

On disadvantages, B. thought that when it came to students marking, they were *‘perhaps not totally honest’*. She said *‘personality clashes within the class might have affected their judgement in a small way, but I think overall they would have marked each other fairly and honestly’*. She thought that the earlier P&SA were introduced into school the more honest the student was likely to be. She reasoned this by maintaining,

*I would say that younger children are probably even more open to self and peer-assessment than older people because older people generally take in more angles, such as the personality angle and the younger child might be completely more honest with the question being asked, just the question, nothing else.*

Teacher C. talked about this *‘purer’* type of honesty when she spoke about her experience with the children in primary school.

### 5.3.3 HIGHER EDUCATION

As outlined in Table 1.4 above, both G. and H. teach first year undergraduate students while teacher I. works with postgraduate students. Own observations are interwoven with those of the teachers below.

#### Institute of Technology

G. works in an Institute of Technology and considers the *'Biggest benefit [of P&SA] to them [students] is to rely on themselves, to not look for other people to intervene and take the responsibility away from them'*. He maintained that it not only helps students to *'look critically at why they should get credit'* but it also involves the students *'in assessing what is credit-worthy'*. Although P&SA was *'heavy on time in setting it up initially'*, it did not appear to be too time consuming for G. and his colleagues. He maintained, *'we don't feel it has taken any more of our out-of-class time than we would normally spend with traditional classes in terms of looking after marks and things'*.

*'Friendship groups'*, *'personality clashes'* and *'agreed marking'* proved concerns for G. in his class as he stated,

*... we had groups where there might have been two antagonists, two personalities that clashed, and if one personality had two or three friends in that group they would gang up on her, voting wise, and they would give all the marks to themselves and would plan it that way: "I'll give you nine if you give me eight and then you give me eight and I'll give you nine and we'll give the other two sixes and the fives". We had complaints about that so it was kind of mixed success.*

A similar experience occurred in one of my own classes, during Phase Two. The issue transpired as a result of one group of students agreeing, amongst themselves, to give each other certain marks. However, the *'agreement'* fell through and the students marked according to their *'official'* assessment criteria. Ultimately, the student who

had complained accepted that the mark she had been awarded was deserved, although she did not think it fair that the other students had changed their agreement.

Despite the concerns raised by G., he thought P&SA were beneficial for students because it *'breeds a little bit of honesty'*. He described how some students had held up their hands and said, *'well I don't really deserve many marks for this because I was away and I didn't really contribute to it. It's that kind of admission that is really good I think for students in their own self-evolvement'*.

G. was eager to extend the assessment into second, third and final year, but said it was proving difficult. He commented that *'... there are a lot of traditionally minded teachers, and probably this Institute is not any different. Also, we find help from the top management is fine, but of course money is a problem, resources are a problem, training is a problem'*. He felt implementing P&SA at all levels would add value to the student in seeking employment. He said it would be advantageous to students *'if you can tell them [employers] you have leadership skills, you have chaired a group before, you have assessed your peers'*.

I found that in my School, while there was some up-take, there was no official policy on implementing P&SA. However, the School has funded and supported this research and is actively pursuing research into other innovative assessment methods. Since this research started, students in the School have progressed to routinely partnering the teacher in their assessment, from first year through to their final year on both the full-time and part-time Education and Training honours degree programmes.

In relation to the ethical behaviour of students during P&SA, which is the subject of a potential further study, students were observed to be fair in their marking. There was never an occasion to doubt that a mark was fair because the marks correlated with own

expectation. However, it was noticed that the marks tended to be not 'harsh' as was the case reported by Teacher C. in the primary school. Students were observed to give the benefit of the doubt to each other in their marks, but the marking itself was not overly generous.

### University

When H. conducted P&SA with his first-year students he said he found it to have several advantages: it gives *'a degree of control and input to the students with regard to their formal assessment [and] . . . in devising [their] assessment'* and *'something that we continually stress in School is the importance of varieties of assessment forms . . . it's another form of assessment'*. He also found it goes some way toward overcoming *'the inherent difficulties in group related assessment forms, in that it rewards people's performance and attendance and participation in groups more so than traditional forms of assessment do'*. H. expressed the same disadvantage as G. when he reported that despite the assessment being anonymous marking, *'people can come to an agreement amongst themselves as to how to allocate marks'*. He also indicated that *' . . . people complained about the process. They're not happy with having to mark themselves and mark their fellow group members'*. This was also my experience, where in some cases, students feared they would not have sufficient experience to either assess their own work, or especially the work of others.

During the interview H. was asked if he found the assessment to be more labour intensive and time consuming than the forms of assessment he was used to. He said *'it's probably quicker, it probably saves time. It is easier to devise and implement and mark than other forms of assessment'*. However, own observation noted that labour and time grew according to the class size. For example, in the initial study there were fifty-

two students. Later on the student cohort grew to just under one hundred students and this increase in size did cost more in labour and time. Attempts were made to alleviate this problem with the help of information technology (IT). Every effort was made to create a software or online form for the P&SA to make it easier for all concerned. However, this ran aground because of what was believed to be a lack of expertise in process automation over the Internet which would allow for differences in equipment, software and Internet service providers. It was observed that the use of IT would have lessened the administrative overhead and would be imperative to the successful long-term adoption of P&SA, particularly with large class sizes.

Teacher I. works with postgraduate students and has observed several advantages for his students. He commented,

*‘... it [self and peer-assessment] allows students to hear feedback from their peers which is, or ought to be, non-judgemental. Of course every feedback is judgemental, but it doesn’t have the connotation of the kind coming from a lecturer, you know... student-lecturer hierarchy. And also I would imagine students hear it better because it comes from their peers so they don’t see it necessarily as an evaluation of their academic ability, but here is a genuine concern and concern to help the student, you know.*

He expressed his hope, saying *‘what we want them to achieve is that when they leave us they’ll have an openness for that same process subsequently in their work’*, adding that if we gave them a positive experience they would leave feeling *‘I learned a lot from that process, I’ve a lot to learn, but... we would want them to be open to participating in a similar kind of practice in their own professional work’*. When we discussed how his students responded to P&SA, he commented that,

*... they would say that they found that module really enjoyable... and they would talk about how they’ve moved on and learned and developed and been challenged and grown from that.*

In his experience there was one notable disadvantage: from the teacher's perspective it was '*certainly time consuming*'.

#### 5.3.4 FURTHER EDUCATION

##### Early School Leavers

F., the early school leaver teacher, despite the troubled path of the assessment, found a result she was not expecting as she explains here

*. . . the students really enjoyed it. I wasn't sure how they would take to it, but I was pleasantly surprised because they really enjoyed it. And I learnt that they really like responsibility, which I didn't realise. Feedback is really important, which I knew, but I didn't realise how important it was to them.*

This was a notable finding because on the first visit to the centre, the co-ordinator, although eager to participate, voiced the concern '*I'm afraid you will come here and do a lot of work and they [students] won't buy into it*'. However, the teacher later reported the students to be '*more connected with the work, more motivated and more interested than they would have been in previous times*'. She observed a level of commitment between the students doing their work and a sense of competition between the two groups, which she believed the students liked, commenting that they were '*definitely more committed*'.

F. said she liked the '*whole idea of it*' [P&SA] and wanted to continue with it in her class. She felt assessment was '*forgotten*' and again stressed the importance of feedback saying '*they [students] want to know where they're at, what they're doing, it's important to them. I think it would be really good to introduce it [P&SA] as part of the curriculum in mainstream and [Further Education]*'.

When asked what educational level she considered it appropriate to introduce P&SA, she answered without hesitation

*. . . as low as third class [approximately nine years of age] because by the time they are in sixth class they'd have a total understanding of it and then it becomes part of the norm as you get older and I think you could introduce it probably in a very basic fun way in third class. It would help them rely on themselves in so many ways, apart from that exact assessment – to believe in themselves more, I'd imagine, and they would be more confident with what they thought.*

F. considered student involvement in assessment beneficial because *'for once in the whole education system they're asked what do they think. That's a whole new phenomenon'*.

She voiced concerns about what she saw as a potential drawback, the honesty of marking or student bias, noting that this could also be addressed by the use of P&SA, observing how this could be both impacted and addressed, deliberating,

*. . . out of school extracurricular activities [or] tensions between students, like arguments . . . they may appear problems, but they are not big enough for peer-assessment not to happen – if anything, peer-assessment could help iron out these situations.*

#### ▪ *English as Foreign Language Students*

In his English language class, J., who had recently experienced P&SA himself as a student of mine in higher education, introduced it to his own students. He felt it was beneficial to his students, considering it a step toward *'being more in control of the destiny of your education mark'*. He believed this was something most young and mature students were not used to, maintaining that *'it has always been the teacher's mark at the end of the day or a lecturer's mark or whoever has marked, the boss's mark at work, you know. So it's a very new thing to people to actually have a percentage of*

*their mark that they can determine, both what they get themselves and what other group peers get'. He saw P&SA as giving 'autonomy' to his students and went on to say 'I found that when students gain autonomy in their own learning, the desire, the hunger, when they get to mark each other's work, it's brilliant'. He felt strongly about this point, reiterating.*

*it [P&SA] brings a really good strong working relationship with your students in the classroom and them with each other . . . it's not always [the teacher's] red pen that goes across every assignment. They can do it themselves.*

The drawback in P&SA for J. was the question that personalities could '*clash quite strongly*' which he thought could affect the marking outcomes.

#### Senior Learners, Urban

The senior learners consisted of men and women ranging in age from their mid fifties to early seventies. Their teacher, E., made similar comments to those reported by other teachers during interviews. She suggested P&SA provided students with the opportunity to reflect on their own performance and to take more responsibility because '*you are asked to examine the level of learning yourself rather than having someone hand you back an answer of either you did well or badly or in between*'.

She described the level of self reflection from students during P&SA, maintaining '*because you are being called on to evaluate yourself, there is more in trying to understand how you perform, and to a certain extent who you are, to do that*'. She also observed that there was more interaction between the group members.

In her comments about the effects of P&SA on student confidence, E. suggested that,



*. . . there is a certain element of both age and maturity in it and also the mind frame you are coming from. [When it comes to] examining your life, when you find yourself being challenged in any way, you either rise up to the challenge or you fail and you run away. And at some point it can go either way, you have no guarantee whether or not it will work; you just have to hope for the best I suppose. It is a braver way of assessing.*

She noted a disadvantage, in that,

*. . . unlike your traditional assessment, you are assessing yourself rather than having someone qualified, so there is less standardisation . . . for instance when you have the Chartered Accountant it makes it easier, because then you know in different countries you are at the same level of education.*

This question of standardisation would normally be addressed by the teacher/examiner in assessing the outcome. However, during this trial, standardisation was not present as the programme was a non-assessment module: there were no standard criteria for E. to assess to. She does raise a good point, but for all formal education, a student-teacher partnership approach should be embedded in this type of assessment, which would then allow the teacher to maintain standards. This does not take away from the value of P&SA in underpinning the use of *assessment* as a *learning method* for contributing towards the development of self, and ultimately, community.

#### **5.4 CO-ORDINATORS' VIEWS**

An illustrative summary account of the co-ordinators' responses is provided in Table 5.2 and this is followed by the co-ordinators' own *voices* in the subsequent sections.

**Table 5.2:** Emergent themes – co-ordinators

<b>Co-ordinator:</b>	<b>K</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>M</b>
<b>Student Cohort(s):</b>	Rural 2 <sup>nd</sup> level & senior	Urban senior	Early school leavers
<b>Benefits</b>			
Encourages reflection on, develops skills for evaluating strengths and weaknesses objectively	x	x	x
Fosters empathising, developing communication skills	x	x	x
Clarifies need for and improves self-confidence, self-esteem	x	x	x
Creates environment conducive to learning honesty, trust		x	x
Builds interaction, co-operation		x	x
Feedback is structured, constructive – ‘averaged’ in group		x	x
Fosters sense of equality, justice	x		
Gives ownership, students accountable, share responsibility for learning			x
Increases motivation	x		
Increases productivity	x		
Natural assessment, students comfortable	x	x	
Requires/obtains engagement, investment of each group member			x
<b>Concerns</b>			
Challenging or impossible for teacher – already overloaded	x	x	
Teenage students particularly sensitive – peer pressure, hypercritical of self	x	x	x
Fairness not guaranteed – difficult but needs monitoring			x
Senior students (out of education for long period) need extended time to adjust to assessment	x	x	
Students need reassurance	x		
Teacher-facilitated assessment open to parental pressure	x		
<b>Appropriate level for introduction</b> (with stipulation to guard against bullying, peer-pressure, friendship bias)	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Second</b>

#### 5.4.1 SENIOR LEARNERS, RURAL

Co-ordinator K. had responsibility for the senior learner programme and the transition year students who participated in the rural secondary school study (see Second-Level Education, Community School). K. collaborated with Teacher D. and had a close interactive relationship with the senior learners, who were mostly over sixty years of

age. He mentioned that some of the senior learners had come to him to ask if the programme would be repeated and expressing his surprise, he commented:

*the thing I found most interesting was about five or six of them wanted to know if we would be running it again next year and if so could they do it again next year, which kind of suggested to me, number one, that they enjoyed it and number two that they got something out of it.*

Speaking about the senior learners' reaction to P&SA, K. remarked that he had observed it to be 'a bit of a shock to the participants'. He attributed this to the students' uncertainty and remarked 'they weren't quite sure what was expected of them'. He emphasised that although he found no fault with the assessment method, it was very new to the students and extra time was needed to understand and practice P&SA. He also observed that 'a much slower pace' would have eased student anxiety, although he did grant that there had been no time apportioned at the start of the programme for any assessment type, summarising,

*I think it is a very positive thing, but I suppose . . . once you move into that sixty plus age group, the formal structured type of assessment is so new to them that I think they need a lot more time to take it on board to fully understand it. In fact it is something that they are probably doing anyway: it is just that it is not done in a structured way.*

He pointed out there had been a necessity to reassure students at the commencement of their programme that there 'wouldn't be an exam', which he said was important for them to hear. He observed students had a palpable fear associated with their earlier experiences of assessment. He suggested this tension might have been alleviated had the term *evaluation* been substituted for *assessment*, making the distinction that 'assessment tries to measure' whereas, with evaluation, 'you are just asking people to verbalise their experience'. Nevertheless, he expected that although anxiety may have been lessened, it would not have made any material difference to the outcome.

Continuing, K. remarked that P&SA had not caused any issues because *'it wasn't the kind of assessment they expected'* and they *'didn't actually equate your [P&SA] assessment with what they considered assessment, which was an exam'*. He observed that as transition year students were familiar with assessment and *'the word "assessment" didn't faze them whatsoever'* and that they had looked forward to carrying out P&SA.

The social aspect of learning is considered important, and in a rural setting, this may be of even more significance due to the geography where lack of public transport is always a necessary consideration. K. suggested that student interaction in the intergenerational programme was weakened by default because of the nature of the class context: the learners were paired with transition year students in the computer class, with no option for social interaction between the learners themselves except *'on the way in and the way out, and therefore in that context it didn't lend itself to this type of peer-assessment very easily'*. He remarked that *'people need to be prepared for it'* [P&SA] and noted that if the assessment had commenced on day one of their programme *'there would have been a different outcome'* (the late start resulted in a quicker pace for participants).

Notwithstanding these considerations, K. held the opinion that P&SA would allow students to increase their level of motivation, improve group productivity and develop evaluation and communication skills. He mentioned that if educators are emphasising self-directed learning and assessing students based on the output of their group activity, then students should have a measure of assessment input. He viewed P&SA as satisfying this need, commenting that *'peer assessment lends itself to . . . that sense of justice, that sense of equality that those that don't work, you know, don't get the marks that those that do work will get'*.

He also suggested, noting it to be a key aspect of any educational programme, that the learners could improve their self-confidence. He believed raising self-confidence was important because, for some students, a reason for attending the programme would have been the opportunity to avail of a '*social outlet*'. He considered that taking part and gaining '*any new skill*' would be viewed as a positive outcome by the learner. K. indicated that he would welcome P&SA, stressing that '*it would have to be done very sensitively*' and be introduced from day one, maintaining that these actions would contribute to removing any sense of anxiety – anxiety which could otherwise act to deter students from attending the learning programme: he did not see P&SA in itself as an issue, but voiced the fear that as a result of any perceived pressure, a senior learner might remain away from the programme. Nevertheless, he stated that if the assessment was managed with care his own fears would be allayed. He spoke about not wishing to '*underestimate the sixty plus age group*' because he envisaged the learners to be '*capable of taking on board these new ways of doing things and new ways of seeing things . . . they were quite open to the whole idea*'. He felt that it was right that senior learners should be presented with the option of assessing if they desired.

Co-ordinator K. viewed P&SA as a positive measure and felt that on this occasion, learners may not have perceived the overall experience '*as education*'. With more explanation he believed this form of assessment could be introduced and it would then be viewed in a more educative light by the learners.

Speaking in relation to the appropriate age at which one would introduce P&SA into education, K. regarded '*maturity*' to be an important factor. He qualifies this by drawing attention to the potential for '*bullying*', saying that a student could suffer as a result of peers agreeing to award a lower mark than deserved for no apparent reason other than '*they [peers] just didn't like the way they sounded, . . . looked . . . whatever*'.

Discussing if there was a way around this issue, K. suggested that by appealing to the learner's '*better judgement*' and by explaining the gravity of having direct involvement into the assessment process and the attending '*consequences*' and '*responsibilities*' that accompany that involvement, students overall will be responsible. He gives the example of electing a class representative, stating '*that in most classes you'll get the best person: not in every class, but in most classes*'.

He suggested higher education to be the most appropriate level because '*there is more of an emphasis on independent learning where people contribute, whereas in school there is more of an emphasis on spoon feeding and force feeding*'. In stating that, he envisaged P&SA could be appropriate to second-level and primary school education, but that in the latter case there would have to be a safeguard in place to protect students from '*prejudice*' and '*spitefulness*'. In all cases he felt it would have to be introduced carefully.

K. then raised some practical points about making teachers responsible for facilitating summative assessment in their own classroom under the current structure, which he considers to be unworkable. The first point he raised was in relation to time. He suggested it would be very time consuming to manage P&SA in the classroom in order '*to do it properly and to do it in such a way that you guard against any form of bullying, which for me would be the big priority*'. He envisaged that this would entail much time, effort and administrative work on the part of the teacher. However, if it was a government decision and properly structured then this, in his view, could be made more possible; at present he thought this unlikely as teachers have no involvement in their students' summative assessment. He reasoned that, at present, assessment comes under the responsibility of an external state body whereas P&SA would bring this responsibility very close to home. He mentioned that teacher-facilitated assessment

would be subject to pressure from parents and provided one example of where such pressure is brought to bear: coaches of school sports teams who experience the question of *'who should get a game – who should, because of who their father is or whatever, you know, that kind of, that's something that exists'*. He views this situation would have more relevance to rural areas where teachers, students and parents have more frequent contact, than in a city where the teacher is unlikely to live in close proximity to the students' families.

#### 5.4.2 SENIOR LEARNERS, URBAN

In common with the senior learners from the rural school, the impact of the learners' previous experience of assessment was also remarked on by Co-ordinator L. She recalled listening to one particular senior learner who reported a loss of confidence because of the *'the harshness of the system'* in her earlier education. She also remarked that many senior learners would hold a negative impression of assessment practice: one which conjures up reminiscences of an examination and marking. Pointing to the learners' earlier experience of assessment, she indicated that *'for many of these students it really represented exclusion, it represented isolation . . . and for maybe quite a few of them that even filtered through to social isolation, even to this very day'*. She observed that as a result of this early experience some senior learners were encumbered with feelings of low self-esteem and self-confidence. Set against this background she regarded that P&SA was able to demonstrate to the learners that they were of value, stating:

*It shows them, probably most importantly, . . . it doesn't matter if they hadn't grasped all of the concepts around the science module [senior learner programme], it was the fact that they would come to a science module and be interested enough to be there and an assessment like that [P&SA] would support and reinforce that idea.*

L. said, *'I think it is an excellent method'*. She continued to describe P&SA as a *'nice, natural, assessment'* which left the students feeling *'comfortable'*. She reported this form of assessment to be very new to students and, similar to the rural senior learners, L. observed that more time was needed to counteract feelings of confusion felt by the students due to the novelty factor of the assessment form. She reported that that while learners were attracted to *'the idea of assessment'* there was an initial lack of the understanding of P&SA, especially around *'they themselves determining what constituted assessment'*. However, she observed that as time progressed and with further explanation and clarification, students gradually came to hold a clearer understanding and vision of the concept of P&SA. The initial hesitation was attributed to the newness of students being asked for their *'opinion'* and being called upon to create their assessment design, which L. remarked *'is something that is quite unique, to them'*. She noted that the ability of students to choose their own criteria on which to assess self and peers was a positive aspect of the assessment. Also, as the chosen criteria related to the *process* it was more user-friendly than assessing self and peers according to subject knowledge. L. believed assessing the *process* proved to be more agreeable to the learners as a form of assessment than assessing subject knowledge would have been. She explained that as the senior learners were newly returning to education to participate in a science workshop there were *'very complex issues for them in terms of their cognitive understanding . . . I think that would have caused concerns around them for the assessment, how they could actually assess each other in terms of what they understood'*. She pointed out examples of assessment criteria selected by the learners, such as, "show respect to each other" and "respect for each other's opinions" and maintained that criteria such as these *'become very valuable elements for them to assess'*.



L. remarked that she observed greater interactivity and co-operation between the students as a result of P&SA. She remarked that they were more open to admitting to not understanding aspects of the programme where previously they were more reticent because of fear or embarrassment to open up to the teacher or peers. She mentioned that while new skills could be developed through the process of P&SA, she thought some existing skills could be fortified as well. She offered the following examples of skills she could envisage being reinforced:

- *the ability to understand each other*
- *the ability to empathise with each other, and*
- *the ability to know how important it was to develop each other's . . . self-esteem*

When discussing the issue of honesty in relation to P&SA, L. suggested that there could be a concern that *'your sensitivity could prevent you from maybe being very, very honest'*. However, she pointed out that this did not detract from the value of P&SA nor did it suggest that seeking honesty was unfeasible; rather she believed P&SA encouraged students to reflect on *'how'* and *'what'* they grade. Observing that honesty issues could arise from learners' sensitivity, she did accept that there was no doubting that this could become an issue. She maintained that while there could be some bias, the assessment could also generate a constructive environment, which would support honest assessment, *'but done in a very sensitive way'*. This was seen to necessitate establishing trust and confidence in the process, which could help create a climate where peers could engage in *'constructive criticism'*.

Viewing the latter end of primary school and on into second-level education as the appropriate time to introduce P&SA, L. placed particular emphasis on students in their teenage years, stressing that at this age students are *'very concerned about what other*

*people think*'. She again stressed the importance of constructive criticism to ensure that peer feedback involved a '*constructive*' rather than the unwanted '*destructive*' component. She also commented that introducing a greater level of appraisal at second-level education could prove to add further value. Referring to higher education, she pointed out that as educators the intention is to enable students to develop as '*critical thinkers and . . . to be able to think for themselves*'. She believed that, with this aim in mind, P&SA would also prove invaluable.

Co-ordinator L placed emphasis on the learning contexts, and, linking this to the last point, stressed the necessity to ensure that they should all provide a positive climate which considers the '*whole issue of self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-confidence, enabling students to adopt a positive attitude . . . enabling students to reflect, to be critical thinkers . . .*'. She placed a value on peer-assessment, maintaining that this form of assessment very much fosters the development of these attributes of the self, which was viewed as a necessary consideration for ensuring holistic education. In saying that, L. acknowledged the drain on time to facilitate students carrying out P&SA can be challenging. She also acknowledged that it can be challenging too for the teacher who is confronted with trying to balance P&SA with the completion of prescribed course work.

Again, in common with the rural senior learners' co-ordinator, L. mentioned being concerned that any reference made to *assessment* could dissuade senior learners from attending a learning programme. However, noting that it could come down to the way in which the assessment was facilitated, she suggested that the manner in which the P&SA study was conducted would work towards combating a lot of the learners' anxiety. Nevertheless, she still considered that despite this, any form of assessment could still conjure up negative associations for the learner. In her concluding comments

she remarked that, *'it is very hard to get away from assessment, and given that that's the case, then this is probably one of the best kinds of assessment that you can have to encourage and support learners'*.

#### 5.4.3 EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

Co-ordinator M., while harbouring initial anxieties, maintained interest and engaged with students and their teacher, F., throughout the study. His initial hesitation to join in was due to the uncertainty of student response. There was a fear that students would fail to engage with the process. Underlying this fear may have been the pressing concern, felt by both senior learning programme co-ordinators, that the study could inadvertently cause students to withdraw from their learning programme. Despite the hesitant start, M. acknowledged at the end that the students had actively engaged with their group project and with the process of P&SA, stating *'I'm delighted and it obviously went well'*. He felt reassured that the process had *'worked to be constructive rather than counterproductive'*.

During our discussion, M. disclosed several reasons for his decision to engage with his students and Teacher F. in the process. His first reason was rooted in his belief that *'innovation is critical in society'*. His second reason was that although he recognised that many of the students were extremely able, their past background and experience meant they were *'coming from maybe a series of interventions where they felt they were knocked and set back'*. For these reasons M. considered P&SA to be a positive experience, which also helped students by bolstering their self-esteem, empowering them with a sense of ownership and giving them a measure of responsibility for their own learning.

Remarking on the dilution of the teacher's role in P&SA, M. described this as a constructive development, viewing the '*sharing of responsibility*' as a step forward. He suggested that by being involved in their assessment, and in particular choosing their own assessment criteria, students learn about the grading process and they also learn collective responsibility. He viewed the teacher would have an active, facilitative role to play in this by helping students to '*set the boundaries*'. He remarked that one way the teacher could do this would be to facilitate students in reflecting on the nature of their assessment criteria and by assisting them in the selection of '*criteria that will stand up and that will work*'.

M. observed that working in a collaborative way and choosing assessment criteria collectively was a positive opportunity and experience for the learners. He described how some of his learners may never have experienced an involvement in '*team effort*', saying this may most probably have been a first experience for them. '*So now they're coming in collectively they'll begin to understand the whole notion of collective responsibility and helping each other out or criticising each other constructively*'. Peer feedback was seen as a way students could help and learn from each other. However, it was emphasised that peer feedback would have to be confined to the agreed assessment criteria and delivered constructively: feedback would always have to be free of any '*destructive*' element. M. remarked that '*all the feedback they'd [students] have got down through the years, in the main, would have been awfully critically and awfully negative*'. He maintained that through peer feedback, students could be advised constructively, '*you fell down on this one, you could deal with that idea, you were wonderful there*'. He stressed this as a particularly valuable way of learning for his students. Apart from the practical aspect of engagement with the subject matter, M. also considered P&SA could enable students to learn to be trusting, take responsibility,

become accountable and be better able to comprehend both strengths and weaknesses of peers. He perceived these as '*very heavy duty skills*', pairing them with the ability to,

*stand back and to say there's an issue that had nothing to do with the marking in classes, they could helpfully be divorcing themselves from that issue and they could, you know, see the trees for the wood.*

His thinking around building capacity to '*stand back*' relates to conscious thinking, which is in line with Aronson *et al* (2005) (see Chapter 2, Section 2.7).

The student/teacher partnership approach to assessment was seen as important. M. described this assessment approach to be '*broader*' and to be more '*effective*', explaining that from the learner's perspective, s/he is:

- *not dependent on one individual's evaluation of what is happening within the group*
- *not dependent on one individual's evaluation of the group's capability*
- *secures investment of all group members within her/his group*
- *develops newness of perspective in relation to self and peers*
- *develops understanding of responsibility resting with self*
- *develops understand of shared responsibility with teacher*
- *experiences a broader dimension than that of the narrower dimension of traditional assessment*

Referring to having observed the students' active engagement in their assessment and group project, M. pointed out that this was not something to be taken for granted. He reported that during the life of the project he observed that students attended their

classes and remained there until the class was finished. He also observed that he was not asked to intervene with students at any stage of the study and that no student had raised an issue with him during this time. Viewing the students engagement with their learning as a positive development, he remarked on the difficulty that can be experienced in absorbing students attention, saying, *'there's lots of people that don't engage them, so something is working at a level with these students in that sense and the whole notion that, there's a lot of, there's huge ammunition in that and the effects in that are massive'*.

Acknowledging P&SA to be *'novel'*, M. considered second-level education as the appropriate age at which to introduce it. He suggested primary school level could be considered, but mentioned that one of the drawbacks of introducing P&SA at that stage might involve the students' assessment criteria being selected by the teacher, wondering *'would that interfere with the validity of the students' input if somebody else set the criteria that's the question'*. He considered the entire process of selecting the criteria should remain with the students to ensure they had no feeling of teacher imposition, which would enable students to take *'ownership'*. In this way, M. thought students would accept the consequences of the marking to be fairer because they had made a collective decision in selecting their assessment criteria.

Self-assessment was noted to be a concern for M. Stressing the teenage years as a time which can prove difficult for students and a time when students may not fully appreciate *'how good they really were'*. He feared that at this age students would be *'more critical of themselves and each other'* than adults would be of them and that they would, in particular, mark themselves more harshly than the teacher would. His thinking is in line with the earlier discussion (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5). A fear was expressed that students may find it difficult to separate personal relationships in order to grade peers

fairly. In addition, he wondered if external confrontations between students might find their way into the learning environment, making it difficult for students to remain objective. In exploring these concerns, he remarked that these issues could arise at any educational level and were not specific to early school leavers. Notwithstanding these concerns, he said '*advantages would outweigh the disadvantages*' of adopting P&SA. By isolating and dealing with any external issues before they were allowed to reach the classroom, he hoped peer marking could be approached in a fair manner.

## **5.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter presents an illustrative account of the findings from interviews held with the teachers and co-ordinators who participated in Phase Two of the research.

A synopsis version of the findings is presented at the beginning of each section. To maintain researcher objectivity, this is followed by an extended view of the findings enunciated in the *voices* of the teachers and co-ordinators themselves.

The chapter offers clear evidence, as provided by the teachers and co-ordinators, who facilitated, worked with and observed the learners, that during the learners' group-based projects, P&SA was seen to have a positive effect overall, across the educational spectrum. There was a particular focus on the students' effort exerted during their group projects, where an increase in collaboration, interactivity and co-operation was noted. It was noticed that students appeared less dependent on teacher instruction and were more willing to take on tasks and to act on own initiative. Students were observed to be more engaged with their projects and the assessment was perceived to have a motivating effect.

These components of the impact on student behaviour and student attitudes is drawn out and discussed in the chapter, together with an outline of other observed benefits and changes reported. Also, reported in this chapter are the drawbacks noted by the teachers and co-ordinators to negatively impact student attitudes and behaviour in adopting this style of assessment. Further, some outlines of suggestions offered by teachers and co-ordinators as potential ways to counteract these challenges are provided, such as time and prior training and preparation.

This chapter also shows the appropriate educational level at which teachers and co-ordinators feel P&SA should be introduced.



## 6 RESEARCH FINDINGS III – PHASE TWO: STUDENTS

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

*Problems and defects in selfhood have at various times been used to explain mental illness, educational under-achievement, criminality, relationship breakdowns, and a variety of other personal and social ills and problems. Indeed, the ability to develop and maintain a consistent and functional sense of the self in the increasingly superficial and anonymous interpersonal context of modern mass societies is widely believed to be one of the cornerstones of personal and social success.*

Forgas and Williams (2002: xxi)

This chapter documents the findings drawn out from the interviews with students who participated in the studies. These studies were conducted in primary and second-level schools, in further education with early school leavers and senior learners, and in higher education with foundation, first and final-year Education and Training undergraduates. The chapter also includes both this qualitative data and quantitative data from surveys completed by the students following the studies.

Answers to questions based on the IMI (2005) in questionnaires supplied the quantitative data, and open ended questions included in the same survey, supplemented by field note records of informal meetings and own observations, supplied the qualitative data in Phase One.

During Phase Two of the research, completed Readiness for Self-Directed Learning Scale and Self-Reliance Inventory surveys contributed quantitative data. Qualitative data were collected from participant interviews, augmented by notes from informal meetings with participants and own observations.

As outlined in Chapter 3, semi-structured interviews with all participants were drawn on to gather the data during Phase Two. In common with the teacher and programme co-ordinator interviews, the student interviews provided each person with some leeway in answering according to own preference and manner. Questions were kept to a consistent format, and in keeping with the terminology, were appropriate to the specific cohort of students being interviewed. The questions acted as signposts in directing each student's attention to specific areas of the experience, and the question categories were repeated in each study as a unifying structure to maintain the educational interrelationship link throughout the lifelong learning spectrum. This consistency enabled comparable sets of data to be collected at each level and again across the family of studies. For example, asking students at each educational level a question about the skills they saw necessary to peer- and self-assess allowed for comparisons to be made both at the level of that particular group of participants and across the range of studies. This structure of questioning allowed for the identification of specific patterns as they emerged both in a group of participants and across the study span. This approach made it possible to recognise concepts, categorise these concepts and ultimately to allow the discovery of the emergent themes from which the provisional theory could be drawn, in line with the GT approach (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3.2).

Where possible, one-to-one interviews were drawn on throughout the studies and where this was not possible, due to participant availability or time constraints, small focus group interviews were employed. Holding interviews, although in a relaxed manner, provided a fixed *occasion*. This offered students the opportunity to reflect, within a quasi-social setting, to describe their experience, giving several benefits:

- ❑ The student was actively engaged and motivated to invest her/himself more wholeheartedly in the process of the consideration, interpretation and explanation of her/his experience. This depth of engagement can be lacking when students are completing a survey-type questionnaire.
- ❑ It afforded the opportunity to listen to what each student had to say and to clarify meaning where this was necessary.
- ❑ It contributed to learner empowerment by providing the student with a voice and the *partnership* approach was seen to be valued and maintained through the shared direction of the interview.
- ❑ It was more conducive to *reflective deliberation* as it permitted the prompting of the interviewee to reach the level of ‘deliberate controlled reflection’ as described by Smith *et al* (2009: 189), (see also Table 3.2, Chapter 3), holding the potential to generate richer data, in line with a phenomenological approach.
- ❑ Although the data collected were both qualitative and quantitative, each yielded information on intangibles, and the collection methods permitted students to evidence their perceptions, emotions and experiences. This helped to maintain a holistic approach, avoiding stripping the *relational* from the academic exercise of carrying out P&SA.
- ❑ It allowed working toward the ideal of ‘a balance between friendliness and objectivity’ (Wragg, 2002: 156). The friendliness ensured good relationships and striving to maintain objectivity respected the necessity to leave preconceived ideas aside, in line with Husserl’s (1931) concept of ‘*époché*’ (see also Chapter 3, Section 3.3.3).

In higher education in Phase Two, interviews were conducted when students had completed their semester and assessments. It was considered that the benefits of relatively fewer sources of potentially richer data (in-depth interviews) outweighed the benefit of a potentially larger number of survey responses. This view is supported by Morse (2007) who argues quality over quantity, maintaining that this can be achieved by ensuring interviews remain focused on the phenomenon. This yields high quality

information, reducing the necessity to draw on large numbers of interviewees, avoiding excessive data collection. This in turn allows data to be grasped and held in the mind, without excessive mental strain, whilst the first level of concept identification is carried out.

Interviews throughout are quoted from in an effort to bring the participants to life through their own voices. Also, extracts from field notes and observations are woven into the findings where appropriate, to provide an in-depth perspective.

Due to the varying formats of data collected, the reporting of the findings will commence with the studies of Phase One. In order to highlight any effects on students which might be correlated with, age or educational level, the qualitative data collected in Phase Two will be reported according to the individual educational levels. The quantitative data collected from the Readiness for Self-Directed Learning Scale and Self-Reliance Inventory surveys in Phase Two will follow. These survey findings are reported separately, as they were carried out concurrently with the interviews and explored solely the learners' readiness for self-directed learning and level of self-reliance respectively.

All findings derived from interviews are illustrated by the students' own voices, supporting the underpinning principle of the research to give students a voice and to endorse a student/teacher partnership approach. This approach also helps to fulfil the criteria against which the validity of a constructivist or phenomenological research process and outcome can be benchmarked (Guba and Lincoln, 2005: 207). The clear representation of the students' voices satisfies the 'fairness' criterion. Making public their views and contributions satisfies the 'ontological and educative authenticity' criterion. The *concrete acts* of participating in the research and discussing their

participation and experience (during interviews), in addition to the prior assessment *training* (workshops and discussions), help satisfy the ‘catalytic and tactical authenticities’ criterion. (See Table 3.3, Chapter 3).

In common with the teachers’ findings, in order avoid stripping the *relational* from the P&SA *academic exercise*, the learners’ findings are presented against a brief conceptual overview. This describes the factors at play during any learning (assessment) experience and emphasises the import to learning of allowing students to develop a secure concept of *self*.

## 6.2 SELF-CONCEPT AND LEARNING

Learning and the ability to benefit from the learning experience are inextricably bound to the learner’s sense of self. Currently there is a growing appreciation of the import of learner centricity, and while the learner centric approach serves to place the learner centre stage, it does not guarantee that the individual *self* is at the focus of attention. The importance of the relationship the learner has with peers, teacher and *self* is paramount and woven into all learning events. It is within this construct that the learning and assessment experiences (including this research) are *lived* by the learner’s *self*, and the following brief overview of the *self*, from a relational perspective, offers a context within which to present the findings.

The essence of *self* has been studied throughout history, and it must be viewed with a historical perspective. One of the first to write a comprehensive text containing this synthesis of ideas was James (1890) who brought together the brain functions, the senses, learning, habit formation, consciousness, conscious thought, relational feelings, attention, associative thought and perception of self - this last topic being studied in its constituent parts: *material*, *social* and *spiritual* self, and from the perspectives of the

emotions, the ego, perceived identity and self-consciousness. A description of *self* derived from James (1890) is outlined below in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1:** The *self*

Constitutes	Emotions	Actions
'... the sum total of all a man CAN call his' (p291)		
o empirical self	self-feeling	self-seeking self-preservation
▶ material self: body, clothes, family, home, property, wealth	love of soul, body, clothes, family, home, friends	bringing about you – family, home, wealth
▶ social self: recognition by others (depends on current social setting)	need for social esteem, recognition	that which brings recognition from the current social group, emulation, envy, love, want of admiration
▶ spiritual self: the inner self, residing between the 'empirical self' described as <i>material</i> and <i>social</i> self and the Ego, the pure, abstract essence of self	all <i>felt</i> emotions and thought – the inward life	a) junction between abstract, subjective thought and physical action b) unconscious motion, such as swallowing, catching the breath, which is the outward expression of the inner emotion
o Ego – the thinker, stream of consciousness	all abstract thought	all <i>willed</i> action

Source: Researcher, adapted from James (1890)

The definition of *self* and the terminology surrounding self is difficult as even psychologists tend to use some of the terms interchangeably, for example, Brown, (1998: 3) notes the use of 'self-views, self-images, identities and self-conceptions'. He offers the distinction that self-referent *feeling* as self-esteem and self-referent *thought* is described as self-concept. Self-concept is defined as *knowledge* held about the self, 'the content of the self' (Aronson *et al*, 2005: 132), or 'a composite view of oneself that is presumed to be formed through direct experience and evaluations adopted from significant others' (Bandura, 1997: 10).

In a classroom context, Lawrence (2000) examines self-concept and reasons that, developed through experience, it influences future experiences through its motivating

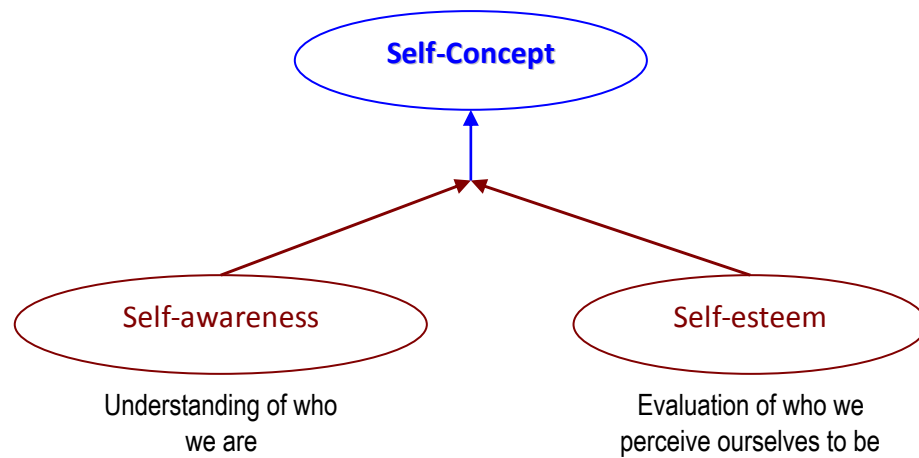
potential. He maintains the learner will feel contented if actions are congruent with self-perception, and gives examples of going shopping and buying one suit over another because the chosen one was more in keeping with the self-image, or not speaking in a public place because the self-perception we hold is one of shyness. Brown (1998: 6) also believes an individual's actions are coloured by the person's self-view. He draws a parallel of this reasoning with phenomenology which he conceives as based on subjective perception, removed from objective reality: actions depend on one's perception as opposed to actual reality. He gives the example of how an anorexia sufferer will hold a mistaken perception of being overweight despite ample objective evidence to the contrary. Also, considering self-concept as a motivator, he provides the example of how an individual can enrol on a course with the ambition of achieving a specified position. He considers this would be impossible if the individual did not already have a concept of being able to fulfil that specific role.

Discussing confusion between self-concept and self-efficacy, Bandura (1997) points out that while self-concept and self-efficacy are both self-referent, the latter is concerned with beliefs in one's ability to manage, carry out and achieve personal goals. Goleman (1995) also sees self-efficacy as holding a conviction that one is command of one's own life, capable of meeting and overcoming life's obstacles as they arise.

Self-awareness is the foundation of self-actualisation, as progress in any sense of directedness begins with the learner's sense of self. West and Turner (2006) locate self-awareness together with self-esteem in relation to self-concept, as depicted in

Figure 6.1.

**Figure 6.1:** Components of self-concept



Source: West and Turner (2006: 46)

Palladino (1990) addresses self-esteem as self-confidence, self-worth, and self-respect, reporting it as an aspect of self that exerts an impact on all aspects of personal endeavours. She assigns it to ongoing aware and unaware self-appraisal of one's capabilities. Also, Humphreys (1993: 25) refers to self-esteem as 'lovability and capability'.

These views demonstrate the difficulty that surrounds the definition of self-esteem, self-concept and self-efficacy. Whatever the definition, all need to be robust to help maintain and sustain lifelong learning. It is a fair assumption that in the interests of maintaining or increasing self-concept, self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth that, without exception, it is imperative that *attention* be paid to the *person* who pursues learning, regardless of age or educational level.

Mayo's (1933) classic Hawthorn experiment provides one example of how paying *attention* to the *person* can make a notable difference in motivation and self-concept: ultimately, if continued, this is certain to positively affect a person's learning and well-



being. This suggested *attention* is not to be confused with a suggestion only to employ a learner-centric approach to learning (assessment), which is included by necessity, but it goes much further than this. Learner centricity can place the learner at the heart of the best teaching and learning practice, but still fail to pay *attention* to the learner. In paying *attention* to the learner we acknowledge and protect the vulnerability of the *self*.

Learner centricity serves to place the learner centre stage, but it does not guarantee that the individual *self* is at the focus of attention. The importance of the relationship the learner has with peers, teacher and *self* is paramount and woven into all learning events. It is within this construct that learners *live* their learning and assessment experiences.

### **6.3 LEARNERS' VIEWS**

Generally the smaller class sizes provided a better response rate, with the smallest classes returning 100% of surveys and 100% volunteering for interview. That compared favourably with the 33% and 52% survey returns and 11% and 16% interview rate for the final-year undergraduates. All together 57% of surveys were returned completed, and 37% of participants volunteered to be, and were, interviewed.

The response rate for open questions included in the survey was higher at 42% than for interviews (37%), although the interview rate was surprisingly high.

#### **6.3.1 PRIMARY SCHOOL**

The all girl primary school students engaged fully with the P&SA process, which is reflected in their teacher's (Teacher C.) comments in Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1. The students appeared confident in their manner, which may have been due to the novelty value of the assessment and also to the attention they were receiving as a result of

participating in the research. They did not appear reluctant or hesitant during the P&SA process, and there was no evidence to suggest they were under duress at any stage as a result of conducting P&SA. A contributory factor in the successful completion of the study may be attributed to the care and time taken by the teacher in ensuring the students knew what was happening and what to expect. However, this care was balanced with equal care to ensure students grasped the significance of *P&SA* and also the concept of *partnering* the teacher to carry out the assessment, as distinct from following instruction. For instance, during the P&SA process each student needed to understand that she had to think about and agree the selection of their assessment criteria with the other group members. The criteria tended to follow a co-operative trend, such as ‘don’t push people out’; ‘listen; and, ‘do the same amount of work as everyone else – everyone’.

The very young students also had to understand the ethics of the assessment. This meant an appreciation of observing and evaluating each group member’s performance (including her own) with reference to the selected criteria, to honestly (objectively) assess the performance: they had to appreciate that this necessitated separating the work from the individual. Field notes record how it was possible to determine when students had grasped this concept. For example, during a discussion in class some weeks before the assessment, it began to be made evident when one student remarked, ‘you have to be honest because if you did not like someone she might have done excellent work’.

The students also had to comprehend P&SA and be able to carry it out (a trial run allowed for this). To this end, from the outset, once the teacher had allocated students carrying out the P&SA into groups of four, she remained in the background as much as possible. In behaving in this manner, the teacher helped to avoid distracting students

from taking ownership of the assessment, and it allowed me the requisite amount of time to prepare for the study. This preparation included introducing P&SA to the students in a presentation (see Appendix C3), becoming familiar with the students, and talking and answering questions. The teacher affixed hard copies of the P&SA presentation and criteria slides to the classroom wall, where they remained in view of the students as an *aide-mémoire*.

Throughout the process, students were encouraged to ask questions on an ongoing basis. These *question* and *answer* sessions allowed students to demonstrate (and me to observe) that they understood the terminology. For example they termed P&SA as ‘marking yourself and your classmates in your group’ and criteria as ‘rules for the marking’ or ‘regulations we set down for ourselves’. While the teacher remained in the background, she was at hand to support and encourage them and acted as a guide to ensure my pace and language usage was age appropriate. There was only one extraordinary request made of the students at the beginning of the study, and that was to try to take as much notice as possible of everything to allow them to talk about it at the end.

It was observed that a combination of steps appeared to support the successful completion of the primary school study. The steps comprised:

- o paying attention to pace
- o paying attention to language usage
- o making time for students to have their questions answered to clarify any misunderstandings and to ensure familiarity with the terminology, or translation into a terminology of their own (taking ownership)
- o displaying visible prompts
- o providing an encouraging environment

- o conducting a practice P&SA session prior to the formal assessment

Carrying out these steps also helped to maintain the palpable excitement and fun that was evident in the classroom from the first day through to the last day of the study. Adopting *diligent care* with the design and implementation of P&SA and adhering to the aforementioned steps is in accordance with Sadler and Good (2006) and Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000). Maintaining the students sense of fun and enjoyment in the learning is in line with Currant and Mitton (2000:107) who assert the need for humour in their call for educationalists to lighten the learning environment with their claim that 'Learning should be fun' and that 'committed, enthusiastic practitioners should facilitate that learning'.

However, notwithstanding this smooth running, there were some logistical considerations which were found to have an impact on the study and which proved more difficult to address. For example, the classroom was small with little space for movement or to separate students. The class was split into those who were taking part in P&SA and those who were not, but who would work on the same group project with teacher assessment (each member of a group would receive the same mark from Teacher C. as the whole group, regardless of their individual contribution). It was intended that the students who were not carrying out P&SA would be drawn on as a control group. However, because all students were together in the classroom during the question and answer sessions and the P&SA presentation it is probable that the control group adopted a sympathetic, biased viewpoint by witnessing the P&SA process, limiting their objectivity. For this reason the control group only provided quantitative data.

Completing the P&SA marking sheets was well practiced. For example, all figures used were integers, but in the practice run one student awarded a mark of  $3\frac{3}{4}$ . In another case, one student was not completely fluent in English, and was observed to obtain help from another classmate and the teacher. To minimise misunderstandings due to the language barrier, it was made certain to interact well with this student.

A further issue was related to completing the P&SA marking sheets. It had originally been intended that students would complete the marking sheets on computer, and while they did have Internet access, there was only one computer, and this would have been logistically very difficult. To assuage the situation, the marking sheets were completed by students manually.

The main observation, on which all other findings depend, is that the students carrying out P&SA appeared to understand the process, and seemed well able to carry it out. In the interviews there did seem to be some confusion between the assessment and their group work project, but observation confirmed their comprehension and ability: this apparent confusion seemed to be due to this being their first time to work in small groups, so answers naturally contained references to the group work as well as the assessment. This observation is supported by Teacher C. who confirmed that in her opinion the students did understand what they were doing (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1).

The overarching findings from the primary school students are summarised in Table 6.2 below. The response rate recorded in the table illustrates that all of the students felt motivated to engage with their group project as a result of carrying out P&SA. It shows that many of them considered this style of assessment to: enhance a collaborative approach; give an awareness of self; empower them in their own learning, and; provide

practice in judgement and assessment, while some described an apparent increase in confidence. Also, it highlights that many students volunteer that P&SA is a fair way to assess group-based activity, which they see as a preparation for their future life. It also points out that some students found assessing their peers disquieting while a few reported being uneasy when they were assessing their own performance. Lastly, the table depicts *Primary* as the educational level at which most of the students considered it suitable to introduce P&SA.

**Table 6.2:** Findings: primary school students

		Primary
Benefits	Motivates	**
		**
	Builds confidence	*
	Fosters co-operation and interaction	**
	Promotes self awareness, reflection	**
	Gives control, empowers learners	**
	Can foster honesty, builds objectivity	**
	Provides practice in judging and assessing	**
	Assessment method fair	**
	Preparation for future education	**
Issues	Anxiety, difficulty marking self	*
	Discomfort marking peers	**
Suggested appropriate educational level to introduce P&SA:		P

Key:	All/almost all	**
		**
	Most	**
		*
	About half	**
	Some	*
	None/few	
	P=Primary	

### Student Voices

Student 1 discussed feelings of empowerment, the fairness of the assessment process, how P&SA supports co-operation and interaction and its importance for the future. She highlighted the last point, and the relevance to her future in going to college, because *'you'll be meeting other people and you're gonna be working with them so it's better to start now than to be too late'*. She showed clear understanding of the relationship between decision-making and P&SA when replying to whether she found it easy to mark the work,

*No, I had to decide – kinda easy and at the same time it was kinda hard because all I had to do was just look back to what the other people in my group just did –*

*it was very hard, I was wondering how would they feel about it, about their grades.*

She felt it fair to mark her own work and that of her peers because *'you've been with them so you know how they were like, what they did throughout the whole project'*.

She continued to say she would prefer to work in a group which had P&SA rather than a group which was marked only by the teacher, saying:

*We can mark ourselves and mark others. We knew how each of us worked and that's how we marked each other by knowing how we worked, how hard we worked, did we work as a team, did we listen to each other.*

She showed a clear understanding of marking the *process* when asked who she thought would be the fairer marker, the teacher or the students. Explaining that her group had worked together and knew what had taken place she said *'I think it was fair with all of us. We corrected each other because we know, teacher didn't – she just looked at us. She was there, but she wasn't there while we were working'*. This points out a core frustration felt by students when group-based activities are marked solely by the teacher. (Burd *et al*, 2003) refer to the difficulty of 'social loafing' or unequal contribution by group members.

When Student 1 was asked what she felt she learned from carrying out P&SA, she referred to co-operation and practising judgement, saying she had learned *'how to work with other people – you have to be honest about how you'd grade them and how you'd grade yourself – how you mark yourself and them'*. When asked what skills she thought she needed to carry out P&SA, she again stressed co-operation and ethical judgement. She expressed the view that students aged nine, ten or older would understand P&SA, but senior and junior infants would not understand it well.



Student 2, thought P&SA was ‘*very fair*’, saying ‘*it’s very good to give yourself and others your mark*’. Although at times during the interview she appeared to confuse the assessment with the project, she showed she understood the difference when she said that what she enjoyed most was, ‘*marking the others’ work*’. As we spoke, she stressed honesty. She demonstrated that she recognised the gravity of the assessment by stating that she needed to understand ‘*how you do the markings*’ and ‘*to be careful I’m giving the right mark*’. When she was asked how old someone would need to be to mark herself and somebody else, she replied,

*It’s good being our age doing it – we learn more when we get older like and go into secondary school and college and all. We’ll know a lot if we’re doing that again. We’ll know how you give the marks . . . because like you mightn’t like want the teacher’s mark. You might like want your own mark and your classmates mark.’*

Clearly, Student 2 displayed no apparent initial anxiety with the process or marking herself and her peers. However, in common with Student 1, Student 3 did experience some anxiety as she pointed out that marking was not an easy experience for her, commenting:

*There’s one thing I didn’t like about it was when you were trying to learn . . . when you were trying to correct someone you’d always find it hard because, cause you’re afraid that when they get their marks they wouldn’t be happy with them and you didn’t really want to hurt their feelings.*

Discomfort with marking is well documented in the literature and would appear to be a frequent worry felt by many students when assessing their peers (see Chapter 2, Section 2.9.3), especially Pope (2001) and Sluijsmans *et al* (2002)) and also Williams, (1992). It reassured Student 3 to know that there was a way around this dilemma as she pointed out ‘*I liked that they didn’t know who gave them the marks because if they did, they might be, like it might cause a fight or something*’.

Self-assessment was also a source of discomfort for Student 3 who was anxious that some students may not be honest *‘with themselves and decide to give themselves all excellent and they know they didn’t try their best’*. This fear about self-assessment is highlighted by Jordan (1990) who reports that there appears to be an inability for students to judge own performance objectively when self-assessing. Matsuno (2009) also reflects on this discomfort, claiming that students have a tendency to mark themselves lower and high achieving students tend to be particularly harsh with self-assessment (see Chapter 2 Section 2.9.8). Student 6 also found it difficult to assess herself although she showed no difficulty in marking her peers, which is evident from her comment *‘I looked at everybody’s work and I wrote down what I thought they did best and how well they did it’*. However, Student 4 found no problem assessing either herself or her peers, saying *‘I think it was easy I just did the truth . . . I did the truth about people, how they did’* and *‘I think I did my best and I just gave myself the marks I think I should have gave to myself’*. Similarly, Student 7 said she found marking ‘easy’.

When asked what they would change about the assessment the students’ responses included:

*I think we should not change anything because I think this is more better for opportunity.*

Interviewee Student 5

*I might have changed correcting yourself and I’d like if it were just peer-assessment because I found correcting yourself because it was quite hard and confusing*

Interviewee Student 3

*I think we should change marking yourself . . . I think because you might like to give yourself a higher mark.*

Interviewee Student 6

Student 5 demonstrated the reflective value of P&SA by saying *'If you're marking yourself, it's not about how much points you get, it's about the work that you did and how best you did'*. Although English was not this student's first language, there was no mistaken her meaning. Student 3 also showed the value of reflecting on her learning as she considered that to be good at carrying out P&SA, *'you need to be good at following rules and helping other people and being kind to them and agreeing, and also paying attention to what other people have to say about you'*. She put the value on introducing P&SA at a young age when she said *'I think you learn things much faster when you're younger because having the experience when you're younger will get you very, very far in your older life'*. Student 4 added the comment:

*Yes, I think too that you learn things when you're younger because you will be learning it again and again when you grow, when you go like into fifth and sixth class and then secondary school cause then you keep learning, just learn more, but you're learning the same thing as you go on too so you'll know, you'll know and it will help you in your life when you know things.*

Personal classroom observations, the views of the students and the reported views from Teacher C. corroborate that overall, students viewed P&SA as a motivating factor. The level of motivation can be deduced from the descriptions of enjoyment and 'fun' the students found in the project as expressed in the students' own responses:

*I loved the project which I have done*

Interviewee Student 5

*it was a good opportunity because we just, we had fun, we just learned more and more things and it helps us a lot when we're in secondary school and when we grow up and we'll always know what's happening in the world.*

Interviewee Student 4

*I did like the project because we did learn a lot from it and I'm glad for what we learned from it . . . cause we got to correct other people and be honest to everyone else and to yourself.*

Interviewee Student 3

*I learned a lot from it.*

Interviewee Student 7

The increased level of motivation was evident from the views expressed by Teacher C. as she observed that the students work was to a '*deeper level and research*' than she would have normally have expected from them. Apart from the practical aspects of working on their group project and carrying out P&SA, the students would also appear to have learned some deeper long-term concepts, which are reflected in the following comments on P&SA:

*I think it was very good 'cause it's telling us to tell the truth, how well you did and how well everybody else did.*

Interviewee Student 6

*You needed to think; not like if you're mad at someone, you need to just say the truth. . . . it's really good because it just gives you a chance to just learn more and it gives you a chance to mark other people and do what you think is a good mark and it's good because you're working hard because you really want to get good grades. You just work really hard to get good grades.*

Interviewee Student 4

*I'd like to do it again so that I can fix the stuff that I did wrong the first time.*

Interviewee Student 3

It was interesting to note that all of the students thought they had been *very* honest with their assessment, which Teacher C. had expected and related to during her interview (see Section 5.3.1). It was also interesting to note that when asked about which age group they perceived to be the most honest, Student 3 said *'I'd say in college because the younger you are you tend to have less sense in you than you did beforehand'*.

Student 6 answered, *'it depends like if it's a truthful person it could be like . . . it could be some young children, it could be some older and it just depends what they do'*.

It is important here to note that not all enjoyment and engagement may have been as a result of carrying out P&SA or from working on their group project. For example, the need to learn is instinctive, which is strongest in the young. Deci and Ryan (1985) maintain that children display intrinsic motivation, being naturally curious, constantly seeking new experiences, attempting, through trial and error, to make sense of their surroundings. They point out that this drive to learn is inherent and it is not a process 'that must be pushed and prodded from without' (p 245). Notwithstanding this, a further factor to be borne in mind is the influence of the teacher in the learning experience.

Described already (see Section 5.2), the teacher plays a fundamental role, crucial in the learning of her or his students. This is further evidenced by Leitch

*et al* (2007) who examined the opinions of students, parents and teachers on the increased involvement of the students in formative assessment. Designed to empower students in their own learning, the study was carried out with students aged eleven to fourteen years of age, in Northern Ireland. They found that without exception, in spite of in-service training to ensure consistency of approach to the assessment for learning,

the *individual* teacher exerts the most influence on how students engage in and relate to their learning. Classroom observation and own personal experience would agree this to be the case. That said, it is clear the students in this study were more focused on their learning as a result of experiencing P&SA and this has been reflected in their views. However, there is no doubt that the teacher facilitated this learning: her attention to the students and the effort she afforded was observed, as noted during the study:

Teacher very involved and supportive. Very impressed with the level of interest and enthusiasm from the students. Teacher mentioned to the class that self- and peer-assessment was very good because ‘you are pairing up with the teacher’ (field note).

Throughout the process [Teacher C.] was very involved with the girls in explaining and ensuring the process ran smoothly. She appears to be a very dedicated teacher and appears totally committed to the children (field note).

Although there was a close association between students and teacher, it needs restating that C. did not coach the students on how to respond to questions or in how to behave: the students’ views were their own.

### 6.3.2 *SECONDARY SCHOOL*

This section outlines and examines the key findings which emerged from the secondary urban and rural schools. As outlined in (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.2), Teacher A. facilitated the class in the former school and Teacher B. in the latter. Both teachers report being heavily invested in their students’ progress and confess that as a result of experiencing P&SA, they have learned that they need to ‘take more of a back seat,’ allowing their students more self-direction in their progress and learning. For the students in both schools, P&SA was a new experience.

In both schools, the students report P&SA as a positive experience. The principal findings are outlined in Table 6.3.

**Table 6.3:** Findings: secondary school students

		Secondary (urban)	Secondary (rural)
<i>Benefits</i>	Motivates	* *	* *
	Builds confidence	* *	* *
	Fosters co-operation and interaction	* *	* *
	Facilitates self-direction and responsibility	* *	* *
	Promotes self awareness, reflection	*	* *
	Gives control, empowers learners	* *	* *
	Provides practice in judging and assessing		* *
	Encourages learning from peers	*	*
	Assessment method fair	* *	* *
	Preparation for future education		*
<i>Issues</i>	Peer mark can be biased by relationships	* *	* *
	Anxiety, difficulty marking self	* *	*
	Discomfort marking peers		* *
<b><i>Suggested appropriate educational level to introduce P&amp;SA:</i></b>		<b>S</b>	<b>S</b>

<b>Key:</b>	All/almost all	* *
	Most	* *
	About half	* *
	Some	*
	None/few	
S=Secondary		

The table illustrates that the majority of the students in both schools had been motivated and had perceived themselves to become more self-directed and responsible as a result of carrying out P&SA. It notes that, in approximate terms, all students in the rural secondary school and half of those in the urban school reported an improvement in confidence and increased co-operation between students. Similar proportions of students from both schools also considered the style of assessment to be fair, and half of all the students referred to enjoying a sense of empowerment as a result of carrying out P&SA. An increase in self-awareness and reflection is also noted by students of both

schools, although to a greater degree in the rural secondary school. In addition, some students in both schools referred to the advantage of learning from their peers. The benefit of having the opportunity to practice judgement in the form of assessment as part of preparation needed for their future in education is noted as important by students of the rural secondary school.

The table notes a disparity of views on some of the drawbacks of P&SA. The urban secondary students all reported feeling anxious when marking their own work, a feeling that was only mentioned by some of the rural students. Conversely, half of the rural secondary students found marking their peers discomfiting, a point not raised at all by the students in the urban secondary school. Their views were more in unison as half of the students from both schools noted that the marking could be distorted by personal relationships within a group situation, although this was usually couched in abstract, conditional terms linked to statements of personal values of integrity and honesty.

The table concludes by reporting the educational level at which most of the secondary school students thought it appropriate to introduce this assessment practice.

### Student Voices

#### ◦ *Urban School*

The students appeared comfortable in accepting the invitation to take part in the study.

There was no initial resistance to the concept, but the students were not without comment. A field note records the first meeting, which reads:

Students did not react with the quietness of first-year (initial study) students when told – could have been because the teacher told the students about the study before I met them. Students' comments: "fair", "someone might not like you and give you a bad mark", "friends can give each other marks", "I'd do more work".



At the start of the study, Teacher A. split the class into two. The students who were to participate in the P&SA study were allocated to three groups of five or six. Those who did not participate worked in groups also on similar projects, but each of the groups was awarded a collective mark by Teacher A. It was intended that this second cohort act as a control group, but here again, due to practical considerations, it was not possible to separate the groups, which meant the control group were present at all times, tending to distort an objective perspective. The control group, as in all cases, only provided data for the two quantitative surveys.

Following the study, students, all girls, recounted their experience of P&SA and their group project. During the interviews students were asked if they had enjoyed working on their project, enjoyment being a sign of intrinsic motivation. Students 9 and 12 (Appendices G3 and H2) described their experiences, indicating also a heightened level of self-awareness:

*It was fun. Just getting to work in a team and kind of knowing and that everyone was going to pull their weight together because we were all grading each other so, therefore, like one person wasn't left with everything . . . everyone knew they had to do something because otherwise they would be affected by it personally..*

Interviewee Student 9

*. . . normally, you'd do research but you'd just print it from the internet and then that's it, but to actually work at a really good project . . . it was always as if we were just trying to work out how to get really good grades from each other so it puts more pressure on you to learn . . . it's good that we have more pressure on us 'cause then we actually learn something, 'cause I don't really learn stuff from projects, but this time I did'.*

Interviewee Student 12

Student 16 spoke about taking greater responsibility because she was confident that in putting in the effort and completing the work in a timely manner *'everyone will give you a good mark . . . and if you just sit back and don't do anything they'll not . . . it's up to you, like'*. Other students also reported taking more responsibility for their work, or on their reflection about being more responsible for their work, For instance, Student 10 said, *'I am more responsible after that 'cause, like other projects, I wouldn't really, I would have kinda left it to other people, but now I keep up my work'*. Approaching it from a different perspective, Student 11 recounted being anxious to be seen to be carrying out the work to avoid her peers marking her poorly, commenting:

*You're definitely more scared of people marking you, 'cause if someone didn't put in the work they would be like, oh, you'd know that all the other people in the group would say "Oh, she put nothing in" and they wouldn't give you a good mark. So you definitely try to put in as much as you can to get a good mark.*

From a different perspective again, but on the same theme, Student 12 reasoned *'It made me realise that it's not fair on other people if they have to do more work, it should be equally divided'*.

Student 8 reported that during her project she felt more confident and able to speak out in her group, commenting:

*when we were putting the project together you felt like you could speak up - voice your own opinions "Oh, I think we should put that there or I think we should do this" - whereas other times you'd be less confident because you just wouldn't, you just didn't think that people would listen to you, but this time you knew they would.*

Student 16 also mentioned feeling more confident as a result of P&SA, explaining that she had confidence to speak up and say *'I'm not doing all the work and giving you the marks for it'*.

Student 11 highlighted both the motivational aspect and a collaborative approach as she explained *'we all made sure that we did equal amounts of work and stuff, so we pretty much gave each other the same marks because it was really a group effort'*. Student 17 linked the fairness of P&SA with the motivational aspect, reporting *'you have a different way with you in a group project . . . you get the marks you deserve'*, clarifying, *'well if you put in the effort then everyone else can see it and then give you the marks that you deserve'*.

Taking pleasure from the empowerment to mark work, Student 8 pointed out that while she was not stepping into the role of the teacher, she found it *'very interesting'* and *'very different'* to be able to say *'Oh, I don't think she did as much, where this person did so much she basically pulled the entire project together'*. As Student 8 continued to speak she demonstrated reflection and deeper learning as she pointed to the benefits of this experience, stating *'I suppose you get to see how people are graded and you realise it's not just the finished product, it's just the journey I suppose, and like to realise just how much work that can go into stuff'*. Student 9 was concordant, explaining *'it's not just about work coming together in the end, it's about how you get there and who does everything'*.

Most of the students considered P&SA to be fair. Student 11 considered it both fair and good to have her peers mark the work, pointing out that *'the teacher doesn't know how much people put into a group. All they know is that work comes out of it'*. In concluding P&SA was *'very fair'*, Student 16 remarks similarly,

*. . . sometimes in a group project you're left to do everything yourself, but yet everybody get the marks for it if the teacher's marking it – because you mark yourselves it's easy to give people no marks if they've done nothing and it's left to you.*

Being able to observe her group members' contributions made it appear a fair assessment to Student 14, who said *'It's pretty fair to rate people in your own group, cause you know what they did'*. Student 15 considered it fair because her group *'divided up the work really fair and everybody put effort into it'*. Providing an insight into the collaborative approach employed within the group, Student 13 also viewed the assessment as fair and reported it easy to mark her peers, stating *'you just like give them what you think they deserve for the work they put in like, 'cause we all like put in the same amount'*. While Student 17 expressed some reservation about marking her peers, she was satisfied that *'it was confidential and so it was okay'*.

Highlighting how it added to her confidence, Student 8 provided some insight into how P&SA fostered collaboration which led to deeper, peer learning, as she explained *'it did [increase our confidence] because . . . what we did was put in and everyone had to think about everything they did and what everyone else did'*. This sentiment was echoed by Student 13, when justifying why she would prefer P&SA to teacher-assessed group work, as she explained *'because, like, everybody learns from like what each other's work is, so that's good too'*. Referring to both group work and P&SA, Student 16 pointed out a further advantage as she considered both to be of benefit and useful for her future, saying, *'I didn't know that anything like that went on in third-level education so it was good to do it now, to know for the future what it's gonna be like . . .'*

However, the fairness of self-assessment emerged as more complex for some students, which is evident from their reflections. For example, Student 10 remarked on peer-assessment, saying that it was *'a bit easy and that because . . . they [group members] all worked hard on it [group project]*. However, when speaking about marking herself, she reported that *'it was pretty hard to mark your own work 'cause you didn't really want to be too easy on yourself anyway'*. This difficulty was also reflected by Student

12 as she commented *'I didn't really know what to give myself. It was hard enough to mark yourself'*. Student 13 pointed to the reason she found it difficult to mark herself, as she said *'you don't really know like what you really deserve'*. A similar comment was made by Student 11 who remarked *'you're afraid to give yourself too much or too little . . . maybe you might feel, "Oh no, I didn't put that much work as [students named] did" and then giving yourself way too much'*.

Reflecting on what might possibly be an outcome of working in a group lacking cohesion because of prior relationships between some of the group members, Student 9 suggested that members of such a group may not award marks according to merit, but instead *'because they were friends, give each other high marks'*. Student 16, commenting on the general honesty of students marking peers, allowed insight into the more subtle pressures that may be experienced by students carrying out peer assessment, as she suggested that it would be

*hard to give somebody nothing, I think. You feel you have to give them something, even if you feel they haven't done anything really: it's hard to – like somebody you're going to see every day, you kinda feel like you can't give them nothing.*

Yet, when questioned further about honesty, she gave the opinion

*The teacher . . . they're honest on the mark, but they mightn't know who did what, so it's hard to know; but we knew who did what, who put in more effort than others, so it's easier for the students to mark than for the teacher just to look at the work and not know who did what part.*

The students were clear in voicing their views about when to introduce P&SA into education: they considered it inappropriate to introduce this type of assessment into primary school because of friendships, among other factors. Student 9 remarked that at primary level, the students would not comprehend what was happening and they

*'wouldn't kind of get the whole complexity of it'*. The existence of friendships among students was raised as a barrier to introducing P&SA before third year in second-level education: Student 12 commented that students in first and second year had recently left primary school and *'they wouldn't take it seriously, they . . . wouldn't like do it like fair or anything'*. The consensus was that third or fourth year was the appropriate stage at which to introduce P&SA into second-level education.

- *Rural School*

Observation showed students to have approached P&SA in a positive manner. It was novel to the students, both male and female, to be in a position to work unaided during their group project. A field note details several observations from an informal meeting with Teacher B., notably:

First time the teacher left the work entirely to the group. She is impressed and says she would use P&SA. Students observed to be very happy with P&SA and have taken a greater interest in what they were doing. Comments included: *'brilliant' 'got their act together' 'delegated work amongst themselves'*.

While students may have been observed to have been motivated and proactive, an earlier field note relates to observing that:

Some students commented at the beginning that if someone didn't like them they might not give them marks.

This note would suggest that in expressing their feelings, some students may have already demonstrated a fear of peer retaliation *prior* to carrying out P&SA. This is an important observation because it would provide some indication that standing relationships within the group (classroom), prior to P&SA, would be perceived to have the potential to carry forward to impact negatively on the assessment.

As outlined in Table 6.3 above, students experienced P&SA to be a motivating factor during their group project. It was also seen to increase confidence, foster co-operation and interaction and to promote a sense of self-direction and responsibility. Similar to the primary and urban school students, Student 18 recalled that during her project she became more aware of others, noting that she would have been more used to concentrating solely on her work in the knowledge that it was going to be the teacher who *'would be correcting it or the judge or something'*. She was aware of trying harder, suggesting it had given her confidence and said *'you put in a little bit more effort when you feel people are kind of watching and just noting what you do'*.. However, to this she added a caveat that was based on 'trust' in the knowledge that group members were adhering to fair play and not working to their friends' interest, a no favours basis.

In a similar vein, Student 20 also recalled that she liked that the teacher left it up to her to *'judge'* and to decide for herself what needed to be done and what way she would allocate grades. She continued to say, *'it was us doing it ourselves, it was us making up our own minds and our own decisions'*. She justified this behaviour to be the correct outlook, saying that *'after secondary school is all you the whole way, just yourself, like your responsibility'*. Pointing out that, in general, she would consider herself to be *'very nervous'* and *'self conscious'*, Student 20 remarked that when it came to the time to mark she was able, saying, *'I didn't mind what people thought and I thought it did help a lot'*. She voiced an awareness of taking responsibility for her own work in the group and acknowledged an interdependent attitude as she said, *'because you are doing it in a group it is helping everybody else at the same time'*.

Closer relationships were mentioned by Student 24 who saw that everyone helped to work on their group report, believing that *'it brought everyone closer together than we*

*have been all year*'. She considered this closeness was because there was a feeling that everyone had to work together because there was no choice. Student 26 reported enjoying being in a position to grade his work and reported thinking '*if I do this right I will get top marks*'. However, not all students saw an improvement in inter-student relationships. Student 19 suggested that she could see no discernable difference in how students interacted, saying '*it didn't help with mixing*', expressing particular disappointment that the boys had not joined in with the girls. Student 19 also reported having a little more interest in her work, saying she realised '*how much responsibility I actually had, and the mark kind of showed me I need to have a bit more so I am going to try my best*'. During my discussion with Student 22 he reported that he had, unlike Student 19, experienced greater interaction between students. He also described greater commitment from students, remarking that they were more willing to be become involved and that they '*wanted to do something, everyone was volunteering to do work instead of, "I will not put up my hand"*'. He suggested that witnessing this occurrence had the biggest impact on him. However, he establishes that, although this may have been a big impact, it was not the only one. At a later stage in our discussion he demonstrated a conscious awareness and acknowledgement of the investment of the teacher's trust. As he spoke he displayed evident pride in his accepting personal responsibility (and by inference his group members) for both the assessment and the work. This can be discerned in his statement, '*you take on responsibility to mark it fair and do the work, and we were given a lot of responsibility and trust that we were going to do it right, and we did*'. According to Ireson (1999) it is important to give students some responsibility at a stage when they are naturally reaching for independence. She regards second-level education as the most constrained and argues an urgent need to give students some ownership of and responsibility for their own learning, which she sees as essential in higher education. Reflecting similar views to those of Student 22,



Student 26 suggests that if one does become responsible enough to complete the work and to grade peers in a fair way that *'it does encourage you to do more work and put more effort into it to get a better mark'*.

When discussing whether P&SA would affect confidence, Student 25 expressed the view that she felt more confident because her peers paid attention to her views, saying *'you had to work with people that you don't usually work with and they listened to your opinion'*. Self-esteem was mentioned by Student 23 who voiced his view that P&SA would not lower one's self-esteem on condition the work was completed, remarking that *'if somebody doesn't do the work and they see themselves not to do the work I am sure that lowers their self-esteem'*.

On the same theme, Student 21 considered that *'if you just get your work done to a high standard I think that would be good for your confidence'*. It is interesting to note that although he reported enjoying the opportunity to be able *'to say how other people were working as you seen it'*, he was uncomfortable grading his peers. His discomfort lay around having to *'judge'* his peers work, which he considered he was unable to do because he *'wasn't the tutor'*. Continuing to reason his view, he remarked *'well they are the experts and they have been doing what they have been doing for years so they would have a better opinion of the standard of work'*. However, Student 24 reported that considering how she would approach the grading had allowed her to feel more confident and mature. She commented further that she felt she had been given the *'chance'* to grade her work honestly and that it had encouraged her to *'come out of yourself a bit and make yourself honest'*.

Speaking about fairness, Student 27 felt satisfied that P&SA was fair, suggesting that the teacher, during a group project, may not see the full *'background'* to the work. He

provided an example of where *'the teacher might think that you could copy and paste'*, but in reality one would know *'first hand'* that one had *'typed all that out'*. He suggested that the teacher's focus is on *'what you have on paper . . . while we see what we have done and all the time we have spent and all that'*. As mentioned previously, Student 21 had been reticent in taking on the role of a teacher when marking peers. This anxiety resurfaced when considering self assessment: he assumed that when assessing oneself it would be likely that *'you would like to give yourself a bit of an extra mark'*. In this respect he was of the opinion that it would be likely that other students could be of the same mind, and that while there is an attempt to be completely honest *'it is tempting just to give yourself a bit of an extra mark'*. However, he accepted that when marking peers there would be an effort made and *'you would try and be as honest as possible'*.

Believing herself to have graded her peers leniently, Student 19, on a scale from one to ten, perceived herself to have been a *'5 out of 10 honest'*. However, her peers were perceived to have been *'pretty honest'* because of the lower grades they awarded their peers. She voiced this was a surprise to her because she had *'expected everyone to be the same, all nice and giving everyone fours and be all nice and stuff'*. She did acknowledge that she would be more comfortable awarding a high grade than a low one [marking scale = 0-4]. When asked if there was a way around this, she replied, *'give them a three'*. Viewing students as having personal integrity with the capacity to grade honestly, Student 22 appeared uncertain whether students could be completely honest. He considered that relationships can influence P&SA because *'you would be more lenient towards them [friends] than you would towards a person you weren't as friendly with or someone you had had a fight with, you wouldn't be one hundred percent fair'*. Student 18 appeared to have been satisfied with the fairness, suggesting that selecting

'honesty' as a criteria ensured constant reminder to all members in the group to ensure personal best and,

*if there wasn't a person putting in as much effort as they should have, we would probably let them know about it and then they were able to improve on their faults. And in the end everybody was kinda on the same level.*

Nevertheless, she admitted to having difficulty with marking herself for fear of over praising and generosity, suggesting peer marking is easier. However, she did say '*it is fair that you have to be honest*'. Personal honesty was accepted by Student 20. She considered both herself and her peers to have been honest during their assessment. She commented that '*you always have one or two who pick their friends and put them with the higher marks than everybody else*', but she felt students could mark with honesty if the ethics of the assessment was reasoned and stressed for them. Student 27 believed that when it came to the time for grading one's thinking can change. He remarked that '*you say you're gonna give him bad marks because you don't like him, but then you actually, going in, go like, actions are purer on the day*'. Student 23 similarly reported the appearance of '*conscience*' and the reassurance of anonymity when confronted with the '*marking the sheet*', saying, '*there is nobody else here so nobody knows what I am going to give them so nobody can judge you so you do mark them honestly*'.

There was consensus among students that second-level education was the appropriate stage at which to introduce P&SA. The reasons given were unambiguous. It was clear from the comments that students did not feel P&SA were appropriate to primary level education. Student 20 held the view that older students (14-15 years of age and older) would not allow friendships to '*impair their judgement*', considering that one becomes more honest as one grows older. Further comments concluded:

*people in fourth and fifth year tend to be more honest and they are more grown up. So I think from the Leaving Cert years upwards it would work well.*

Interviewee Student 18

*fifteen to eighteen years old, middle aged and older people (grey hair) would see . . . the results and they'd know that they are well capable of still doing their best and stuff.*

Interviewee Student 19

*fifteen and sixteen . . . first year, second year and primary schools, they are just too immature to give any honest mark at all.*

Interviewee Student 24

Student 21 suggested second year and *again* in transition year or fourth year in second-level education (or 18 to 19 years) to help students prepare for higher education. He considered this would provide experience in carrying out P&SA and a greater understanding of what lay ahead for the future. Finally, in an effort to reduce the impact of friendships, Student 22 also suggested second-level education, suggesting that because first-year students are all *new* and in *transition*, it makes it more likely that they '*would be more inclined to give a more honest answer*'. In primary education students were believed to have '*made friends*' and '*mightn't understand the whole [P&SA] process*'.

### 6.3.3 FURTHER EDUCATION – EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

A field note documenting observations from an early meeting with Teacher F. provides an indication of her initial response to involving the students in the P&SA study:

Teacher F. said there were approximately ten to eleven in classes and she was very interested in the idea because she likes working with new things. She expressed the reservation that some students might not want to take part because they were not motivated by results, and that some students may interact more positively than others with the study. At the end of the meeting the teacher said she would *'love to do it'*.

In common with the primary and secondary school students, the early school leavers were visibly curious and eager to participate in the study. Following the initial meeting with students, another field note records:

Students joined in very well – excellent participation. Teacher and students discussed possible weighting of the marks. It was agreed that the teacher would allocate sixty percent of the marks while students would allocate forty percent. In order to select two groups, one student suggested their names could be drawn from a 'hat', which was agreed by the teacher and the other students. They then wrote their names down, worked together to cut these into slips and carried out the selection. Afterwards, both F. and M. (visiting the class) said it was gratifying to see the students act in this way.

As described in Chapter 5, Section 5.3.4, Teacher F. observed that her students engaged with their work and took responsibility to a greater degree than usual. She also observed that the students all exhibited a wish for feedback which was greater than she expected. Co-ordinator M. (Chapter 5, Section 5.4.3), in close alignment with Teacher F's views, observed that students had taken advantage of the experience, to their benefit.

The students themselves, as illustrated in Table 6.4 below, gave a clear indication that they perceived the learner/teacher assessment partnership to have been a constructive experience. The table gives an overall picture of student appreciation of P&SA. It shows that all (or almost all) of the students interviewed saw the assessment style as a fair way to grade a group project. In addition, they describe experiencing an improvement in their level of motivation, an increased sense of empowerment and control, and becoming more aware of self and reflecting on self. Notwithstanding all of

the perceived advantages, there were concerns, the chief of which was that students saw friendship bias to be a potential drawback to this form of assessment.

**Table 6.4:** Findings: early school leaver students

		Early school leavers
<i>Benefits</i>	Motivates	★ ★ ★ ★
	Builds confidence	★ ★
	Fosters co-operation and interaction	★ ★
	Promotes self awareness, reflection	★ ★ ★ ★
	Gives control, empowers learners	★ ★ ★ ★
	Can foster honesty, builds objectivity	★ ★ ★
	Provides practice in judging and assessing	★ ★ ★
	Encourages learning from peers	★ ★
	Assessment method fair	★ ★ ★ ★
	Preparation for future education	★ ★ ★
<i>Issues</i>	Peer mark can be biased by relationships	★ ★ ★ ★
	Need more time, preparation, experience	★
<i>Appropriate educational level:</i>		S

<b>Key:</b>	All/almost all	★ ★ ★ ★
	Most	★ ★ ★
	About half	★ ★
	Some	★
	None/few	
S=Secondary		

### Student Voices

The increased motivation, articulated as engagement with the project, is explained by Student 28 in comments as he describes working harder because he wanted to get on well with the other team members: he suggested this was because he wanted to do well, commenting ‘*you want them to mark you fairly and give you a good mark. So you work harder with them*’. He felt it was important to exert more effort because it was his peers

grading him and not the teacher. He discussed being in the role of the teacher, and learning about grading work and all that this process entailed.

As a result of being in possession of this insight into the assessment process, Student 28 explained, *'you'll sort of put in more effort you know, 'cause you know really what it takes to get a high mark and all that'*. He also spoke about feeling competitive (taken as an indicator of motivation), reasoning this was because *'you want to do better than a lot of them will'*. He also pointed out that P&SA places power in the hands of the students, saying *'they prefer they had their own grade . . . they'll work hard like and they'll make sure they do that and they'll have a grade from the teacher as well'*. This was thought to generate more of a sense of personal control over grades, which he believed to encourage greater effort: as the *process* and *effort* were visible to peers, their work can be graded correspondingly. In this way he perceived that it would be possible to receive more marks from peers than from the teacher.

The principal benefit to Student 29 was explained to be learning more about himself. He remarked that by looking at peer feedback he developed insight, which caused him to reflect on himself and his own values. He considered that *'you actually do think about yourself, not about others, just yourself and your own being and then you find out more things about yourself, you find out that you are who you are'*. This was important to him because he thought that if peers harboured any misguided ideas about him, the P&SA process would redress these. He reasoned that he would be aware of his own personal learning and his peers could see that he was *'truly honest, genuinely able to do it . . . able to move on . . . and hopefully do better the next time'*.

Student 30 had come into her group at a later stage than the rest of her team members. Despite the late start, she joined in with her group to complete the project. During our

discussion she reported that she thought the assessment was fair, but difficult to understand. She mentioned that she had no difficulty with assessing herself or her peers, expressing a preference for working on a group project which involved P&SA, rather than working on a teacher-only assessed group project. She suggested this was because *'you get more marks'* and because *'you have experience marking it'*.

Student 32 described a positive experience and a good personal outcome as he said, *'I felt great after it all'*. He believed he had acquired self-knowledge and an insight into how he interacted with his peers. He spoke about building his capacity to communicate with others and learning to understand the assessment and marking process. He stated a preference for P&SA and reasoned this was because *'nobody knows you better than you know yourself'*. Agreeing with this sentiment and suggesting it was not necessary for teachers to be the perpetual assessors, Student 31 added that having experience of the assessment process and an opportunity to grade peers was important to her. She equated this with being *'a good student'* and being self-directed. She also put forward the opinion that students were as capable of conducting the assessment as the teacher, and that through assessing her peers she was developing an insight into the quality of their work. Student 33 liked the assessment and said he had no difficulty in grading himself or his peers, but he disliked his peers marking his work *'cause they could give you a bad mark if you got [deserved] a good mark . . . you could get a bad mark even if you got [deserved] a good mark'*. Echoing this view, Student 29 stressed that there was value in friendship over that of the work carried out, and that as a result of this loyalty there was a reluctance to award a low grade *'in case you fall out with them or anything'*.

Expressing personal honesty during the assessment, Student 32 also described some discomfort with the process, voicing his fear that there was the potential to grade oneself more leniently. He also expressed discomfort at peer-marking due to lack of



knowledge; nevertheless, he believed he had marked his peers fairly. He reasoned his perceived lack of ability to mark himself and his peers was because he was *'not like a teacher, they know so much'*. Student 28 described marking his peers and himself fairly and according to merit. However, he felt the teacher would be more objective when marking than the students because *'the teachers don't really have friendships with students'*, observing that students who may lack maturity and seek popularity may be tempted to grade on a friendship basis. Despite these reservations he remarked that he had learned to *'put friendships aside, doing work fairly and honestly like. Like you grade people properly; like, it doesn't matter who they are, if they deserve the mark, give it to them like'*.

Through the process of P&SA, Student 29 thought that he had acquired some life skills and that with practice it would be possible to: become more efficient in carrying out the assessment; understand the project topic more; learn more about self and peers; gain management skills through managing the P&SA process; develop enhanced self-confidence, and; develop confidence in the P&SA process. He believed confidence in the process was made possible because of the *confidential* nature of the assessment. Emphasising the need for total confidentiality, he said that in the past, feedback would have contained an element of public knowledge in the classroom, which he thought lessened its value. He reasoned the public airing was not required because *'you know deep down what you have to do right and what you have to do to move on in life, maybe in the future and stuff'*. As a result of the confidentiality clause he added that more skills can to be learned, such as *'honesty'*, concluding that *'you'd fly through life with assessments like that'*.

Relevant to the early school leavers' findings, and to the research overall, is a report of the Department of Education and Science (2006) on an evaluation which was carried

out in another early school leavers' (Youthreach) centre in the Irish midlands. The evaluation highlighted that the students in that particular centre, in addition to having a sense of belonging, were proud of their centre and felt that their involvement was appreciated. Although this current research did not explore such student feelings of belongingness and appreciation, what is evident, both from observations and the students' responses during our discussions was that, as in the evaluation report, the students in the study 'showed a sense of pride and delight when asked to discuss their work and they display[ed] a sense of achievement and enjoyment of their work' (Department of Education and Science, 2006: Section 4.4). The evaluation report also highlighted that the proclivity of the teacher to take the lead prevented students, in many instances, from having the chance 'to take initiatives and be proactive in their own learning and in the progression of their work' (Section 4.2). This type of situation runs counter to the ethos of a learner/teacher partnership approach, and opposes the core principle of the Youthreach programme, which mandates that the learner be placed at the centre of all teaching and learning methodologies (Youthreach, 2011). It also limits student responsibility for learning, again running counter to the ethos of both Youthreach and the current study. While accepting that all of the Youthreach stated objectives are relevant to the early school leavers, the following objectives are of particular relevance to the study:

- ❖ Personal and social development and increased self-esteem
- ❖ Promotion of independence, personal autonomy, active citizenship and a pattern of lifelong learning
- ❖ The promotion of social inclusion

Secondary school was viewed by the students to be the appropriate stage at which to introduce P&SA. Student 32 stated a preference for introducing the practice at a

teenage level, where students would have *'control'* and were in a position to know more about themselves. Student 31 agreed, but suggested it should be implemented at the latter end of second-level when students were preparing for their Leaving Certificate examination. She did not recommend this form of assessment for primary school students, maintaining *'they're not gonna really know what you're on about'*. Students 29 and 30 also shared her view in relation to implementing P&SA at second-level education. Student 30 suggested it was appropriate then because students were *'older'* while Student 29 understood that students would have some knowledge of themselves at that stage. He also held a strong conviction that friendship issues would be a predominant influence in primary school. However, in stating this, he added that P&SA could be introduced in primary school, with the caution *'you'd have to just start it off slowly in secondary school and then maybe bring it back one or two years to fifth and sixth class'*.

#### 6.3.4 FURTHER EDUCATION – SENIOR LEARNERS

The responses, as outlined in Table 6.5, show that most, almost all or all of the senior level students reported an increase in their level of motivation during their group project, with the majority describing an improvement in their confidence.

**Table 6.5:** Findings: senior students

		Senior learners (urban)	Senior learners (rural)
<i>Benefits</i>	Motivates	* *	* *
	Builds confidence	* *	* *
	Fosters co-operation and interaction	* *	
	Facilitates self-direction and responsibility	* *	
	Promotes self awareness, reflection	* *	
	Gives control, empowers learners	* *	
	Provides practice in judging and assessing	*	
	Encourages learning from peers	* *	
	Assessment method fair	* *	
<i>Issues</i>	Peer mark can be biased by relationships	*	
	Anxiety, difficulty marking self	* *	*
	Discomfort marking peers		* *
	Need more time, preparation, experience	* *	* *
<i>Appropriate educational level:</i>		P	

<b>Key:</b>	All/almost all	**
	Most	**
	About half	**
	Some	*
	None/few	
P=Primary		

Although sharing and reporting this perceived positive impact on motivation and confidence, a divide in perception appears to manifest itself between the urban and rural learners. This break in experience is illustrated in Table 6.5, which demonstrates that, while all or almost all of the urban senior learners remarked on the fostering of interaction, facilitation of taking responsibility for learning, promotion of reflection and fairness, and most enjoying feeling empowered and learning from their peers, none of this is mentioned by the rural senior learners. This, at least in part, may have been due

to curtailing of interviews because of a lack of time (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4.1).

Nonetheless, a discernible group loyalty was displayed as they stated in their

Programme Evaluation Report (Appendix H): '*we as a group feel uncomfortable about having to mark each other, so we decided to do it together*'. This would also appear to suggest that, to some extent, at least some of the rural students demonstrated both self-reflection and awareness, and an increase in co-operation (as did all or almost all of the urban learners).

It is interesting to note that while all or almost all of the rural students expressed experiencing difficulty marking peers, these feelings appear to have eluded the urban learners. Although the latter students did not report concern in relation to marking peers, some students did raise the issue of relationship bias. Staying with the urban learner, half of these students described feelings of discomfort during self-assessment, while only some of the rural learners reported discomfort. It is evident from Table 6.5 that both the urban and rural students appear to be united in their responses indicating a need for more preparation, time and experience in carrying out this style of assessment. It is important to note here that while the issues surrounding the preparation for and carrying out of the assessment concentrated heavily on the logistics of carrying out the assessment, this had the effect of causing some confusion. The students were becoming newly re-acquainted with education, and assessment carried many negative connotations for some of the senior learners, which is clearly reflected as the students recount their experience below. It is also important to note that the co-ordinators of both senior learning programmes emphasised that *assessment* had not been factored into the learning programme. Their reasons for this are discussed in Chapter 5, Section 5.4.1 and Section 5.4.2.

## Student Voices

### ◦ *Urban Senior Learners*

A field note records observed learners' reactions and comments in relation to the invitation to participate in the P&SA study at the initial meeting:

Students were quiet and slow to respond initially to the invitation. First students who answered declined to take part with comments such as: *'I'd rather just come in for the learning'* and *'I wouldn't want to be involved in this'*. Another student responded by saying *'what will be out of it? – no job'*. He pointed to the teacher and an undergraduate student involved in his intergenerational science class and said, *'they would get it. No jobs for me'* [age related]. There was a retort from a class peer who remarked *'we have a duty to do it because it will be different in ten or fifteen years time'*. Other students responded by saying it would be *'good to get feedback'* and *'good to monitor our learning'*.

Student 34 volunteered personal information, mentioning that she was seventy-two years of age, involved as a volunteer in her local radio station, and prior to retirement she had worked as a primary school teacher. Throughout our discussion she reiterated several times how important it was to her to continue to be in a position to contribute to her family, others and the community. She mentioned that having reared nine children, managing the home and family finances, she now pondered her own future. She remarked *'I felt like for me as a person at this stage of my life, did I have more to offer'*. She reported receiving a boost to her confidence during the P&SA process, saying *'I wasn't afraid to voice my opinion or I wasn't afraid to judge myself'*. She thought that P&SA required regular comparison with peers in her group: this comparison leads to the development of greater self-knowledge and capacity, so she envisaged that continued use of P&SA would provide her with *'more confidence to be more capable'*. She also reported that as a result of carrying out the assessment she felt that she could become more tolerant of people, including family members and other volunteers at the radio station. She said *'I think it makes you think about things. I think it makes you think about yourself like'*. She held a strong view that assessment should be part of

senior level learning, commenting *'you really want to be [assessed] because you want to know, well am I good for anything like. . . '*

When asked what she would like to see coming out of the assessment, Student 34 suggested she would like to have someone to oversee one's progress, someone to encourage and to give *'you a pat on the back and say well done'*. She commented further that this would not have to be carried out by a formal assessment, suggesting *'it need only be an interview, but at least if you felt there was somebody valuing your opinion and thinking that it was well worth while talking to her'*. The value of assessment and her own need to have her learning and her *self* valued is made clear in her statement: *'I have to say this is what I want - to be assessed and say 'am I worth anything?'*. When Student 35 was asked if he thought it appropriate to assess senior students' learning, he replied *'I don't think age matters'*. He viewed it as important to assess the learner's work and pointed out that this assessment should be carried out free from any connotation of being awarded *'a first, second or third at the course end, or who was the best student'*. He described P&SA as helping with knowing which direction to take, and giving one *'that little urge to keep going'*. He also reported that the assessment encouraged learners to be more focused, more aware of self and others and to have a greater sense of being straightforward. He offered an example where one peer had intended to withdraw from the learning programme because *'she felt she had nothing to offer at all'*. Student 35 said, *'we explained everything to her . . . we wouldn't have liked her to walk out, that she was expected to stay'*. He believed this peer feedback encouraged his group member to stay. Peer feedback was also stated to have been crucial to his own learning. He recounted feeling that he had *'played his part'* and that his contribution had been recognised and appreciated by peers. He said *'it means success'* and *'personally I felt good about it'*.

The stated benefits of P&SA to Student 36 were reported to be:

- Improved awareness of self, one's self-confidence and one's overall level of awareness in general
- More positive interaction between peers inside and outside of the classroom
- Increased awareness of one's manner when interacting *with* peers and *how* peers interact with the self

He stated that assessment, regardless of environment, can be constructive '*no matter what age . . . for guidelines both for ourselves and for the people that are in charge*'.

Referring to his group's selected assessment criteria, he explained these criteria proved to act as '*a template . . . a constitution*'. He observed the agreed criteria to be '*a very good starting road - everybody knew, irrespective of science [learning topic] or anything, everybody knew what was involved, what was expected and, more importantly, what actually took place*'. He envisaged P&SA as a useful '*indicator*' for the future, in the sense of indicating whether one will '*move back or move forward*'. He also viewed the assessment as having the capacity to encourage the learner's sense of responsibility and accountability, stating '*you are more in charge of your own attitude*'. While recognising P&SA to be '*a very healthy thing, very healthy, very mature thing*' he held the reservation that some sensitive learners may be made uncomfortable by the assessment. Despite his reservation, he believed it would still be to students' advantage to draw on P&SA. He suggested that taking the following steps could improve the assessment process for future students:

- Acknowledge student anxiety in relation to the assessment
- Assuage anxiety by providing reassurance that P&SA is employed solely as a means of facilitating learning
- Provide plentiful information and documentation



- Factor in ample time with sufficient number of sessions to encourage students to:
  - ▶ feel comfortable
  - ▶ ask questions,
  - ▶ seek clarification
  - ▶ receive reminders of previous and earlier information

He thought with practice, future students could gain confidence in the assessment, which would lessen the natural anxiety students are subjected to when faced with any new learning experience. He also suggested that in repeating the assessment a *'second time round, it might throw up maybe, not a different, but maybe a result might be more beneficial . . . you could see a different angle to it'*. His concluded that,

*when you do anything like that you certainly gain more skills, you certainly gain more skills than you give in other words, because you know yourself that bit better and when we know ourselves a bit better we can be happier people we are put in touch with our resources, maybe talents we didn't know we had at all and that whole process can lead into another. So it's like a circle.*

The biggest impact on Student 37 was that she saw *'that everybody was willing to do it'* [P&SA]. She held the perspective that, in reaching senior status in life, one has come to take for granted perceptions which are not the only ones compatible with reality, and it is *'good to be reminded that other people have different thoughts on the way you are doing things'*. She made the point that, for senior learners, P&SA was even more useful than for younger learners, because examination and assessment had ceased to be an issue for the former. She thought the assessment would provide feedback, which could aid self-confidence. Student 38 felt P&SA applied to *'any generation type'*. He pointed out his group had been disadvantaged by being denied *'enough time to be together'*. The lack of time was again raised by Student 39, who was disappointed that she and her peers did not *'get long enough to be in our little groups'* and by Student 40 who

commented on the value of the P&SA, but pointed out the organisational shortcomings. Their observation surrounding the challenge of time was corroborated by Teacher E., who commented that *'there didn't seem any other slots that were available and that was the problem and so I think there should be more time given to organising time'*.

When discussing the age at which the senior learners would introduce students to P&SA, Student 34 suggested that it would be beneficial in primary school. She thought it would be of benefit to retiring, shy students particularly, giving them confidence and an opportunity to communicate with others and to *'stand up and talk about themselves'*, which she thought could go on to help when seeking employment and attending interviews. However, she believe this to be challenging for the tutor, suggesting the *'burden of education would be enough for a teacher without adding more work for them'*. Nonetheless, she said she could see that it would be fruitful to include P&SA on a monthly basis, to allow young students gain practice in the aforementioned areas. Student 36 also suggested that P&SA could be introduced at an early age, considering the latter end of primary school to be an appropriate level. With the accumulation of experience in P&SA, he felt students could develop insight into their abilities and talents which (a) could inform a career guidance teacher in the future and (b) assist the students with their choice of future career. He perceived this investment as a *'long term effect'*. Student 37 reasoned primary school to be a suitable time because students at ten years of age are *'very intelligent . . . they have opinions for themselves'*.

#### ◦ *Rural Senior Learners*

There was a mixed reaction from the rural senior learners when they were invited to participate in the study. A field note records that,

Some students displayed little warmth at the prospect of joining in the study, declaring their outright rejection of the idea. Some students were very receptive

and happy to engage with the concept. Seven students out of a total of eleven agreed to take part.

The students, while agreeing that they would like to repeat the process and describing it as a positive experience, all remarked that it could have benefited from the addition of more time. For instance, Student 41 remarked that while the experience was positive, *'if we had to have a little more time it would have been really excellent'*. In agreement about both the enjoyment and the lack of time during the P&SA process, Student 42 said it was not easy to grade her peers due to the lack of time. She commented that that her peers *'didn't have enough time to be together as a group, and it went quick to gather it all together and put it together'*. A similar view was also held by Student 44, who described needing more time because she felt she had been *'just judging vaguely'*. Student 43 found self-assessment to be easier than peer-assessment saying *'it was easier to mark my own because I knew what I was thinking and doing and learning'*. She discussed having to *'stop and think'* to mark her peers, and that because of the lack of dedicated time to work with them it was difficult to do. As well as regretting the lack of time to get to know her peers, she held a concern about not having *'the right or the knowledge to go marking somebody else'*. Reiterating that it was difficult to mark her peers, she said *'I am wondering why would you have to do that?'* However, she acknowledged that the process had provided her with greater confidence in herself. Disclosing that she also felt anxious with marking others, Student 42 remarked that this was the only aspect of the project she was uncomfortable with. She mentioned that she would have preferred the transition year student (tutor) to have been the assessor, remarking that *'they know what we, how we came in and how we're going out, they know what we have achieved here, what we have learned'*. Student 41 was in agreement about wishing to have the tutor as assessor, but described taking initiative

and overcoming her dislike of technology, feeling she was in a position to apply herself *albeit* it with the knowledge that it would take effort on her part to do so.

It was noted that the lack of time which proved troublesome to the urban learners seemed to have been compounded for the rural learners. It was possible, but difficult overall, for any of the participants, including myself, to communicate and interact with any level of spontaneity during the study because of the nature of the class. For example, as the senior learners were acquiring computer-based skills, they were each paired with a transition year student, in effect confining them to the computer. This necessarily restricted student movement and caused a natural separation of students within the class, which in turn led to isolation and a lack of common space for the senior learners to converse and interact with each other. As the timetable had not committed time to group-based activity or to assessment, there was a pressure on all participants to adapt to circumstances and to a shortage of time. Teacher D. expressed interest in carrying out another study in the future as part of the intergenerational learning programme, with the intention of improving these conditions.

Own observations suggests that the rural learners appeared laboured in making a clear distinction between the subject of their learning (computer) and P&SA. Although they appeared to have a full understanding of grading self and peers, some remarks would suggest a level of confusion. This is not to suggest that students acted untoward in any way: rather it suggests that there may have been a natural confusion as some of the learners were experiencing P&SA, computer learning and their first learning venture following a considerable absence from a classroom context. Any natural confusion could also be explained by the introduction of *assessment*, which students had already established would not be part of their programme (see Co-ordinator K., Chapter 5, Section 5.4.1).

It could be argued that confusion suffered by *any* senior learner could be the result of the aging process. This may in some cases (though not in these studies) accurately represent the reality of lifelong learning. However, according to Ireson *et al* (1999) ‘the basic mechanisms by which we learn do not change over our lifetime although they may become less efficient in old age’. Old age is subjective, but if education is sincere about accommodating lifelong learning, all aspects of senior learning must be factored into the equation. Relevant to these findings and acting to inform current and future learning Mezirow (1991) asserts that older adult learning, or the use of memory, is little different to that in younger adults; differences that seem apparent are due to the perceptions of the older adult, which are filtered through a much richer layer of experience than exists in younger adults. He clarifies, through reference to the literature, that deterioration in cognitive function or memory in older adults can often be assigned to life transformations rather than the actual aging process: for example, when a person retires their practice of cognition may be reduced from handling complex functions for much of every day to mundane, less cognitively taxing, functions. Wlodkowski (2008) considers aging and memory from the perspective of motivation and suggests that ‘generally older learners are likely to have the most problems with initial learning and subsequent recall when learning activities are fast paced, complex or unusual’. It could be said that this is relevant at all stages of learning, but in the case of *all* of the senior learners who participated in the study, it meant that the quickened pace, complexity of matter and the uncommon experience made excessive demands, which could have undermined their self-confidence and their confidence in the P&SA process. This would warrant attention in planning for any future study or learning episode which aims to facilitate the senior student.

### 6.3.5 HIGHER EDUCATION – FINAL-YEAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

As illustrated in Table 6.6, all or almost all of the final-year part-time and full-time undergraduate students consider the process of P&SA to effect an improvement in personal motivation.

The advantage of experiencing an increase in confidence was reported on by at least half of the part-time education and training students to all or almost all of the full-time education and training students. All or almost all of the combined students observed P&SA to cultivate a spirit of collaboration and interaction among team members. This assessment practice was perceived to support a self-directed approach, support a sense of responsibility and offer some control, engendering a sense of empowerment, by all or almost all of the full-time, and most of the part-time learners. The practice was viewed to encourage a reflective mind-set and to raise an awareness of the *self* by all or almost all of the full-time students. In addition, half of the combined student cohorts reported on the assessment's capacity to cultivate honesty and objectivity, and to provide a fair assessment, although some of the full time students said they thought it unfair. It was observed to lend practice in judgement and assessment skills by half of the full-time students, while peer-to-peer learning was acknowledged as an advantage by half of the part-time students.

**Table 6.6:** Findings: higher education students

		Final-year undergrad (f/t)	Final-year undergrad (p/t)
<i>Benefits</i>	Motivates	** **	** **
	Builds confidence	** **	** **
	Fosters co-operation and interaction	** **	** **
	Facilitates self-direction and responsibility	** **	** *
	Promotes self awareness, reflection	** **	
	Gives control, empowers learners	** **	** *
	Can foster honesty, builds objectivity	** **	** **
	Provides practice in judging and assessing	** **	
	Encourages learning from peers		** **
	Assessment method fair	** **	** **
<i>Issues</i>	Peer mark can be biased by relationships	** **	** *
	Discomfort marking peers	*	
	Need more time, preparation, experience	*	** **
<i>Appropriate educational level:</i>		P	P/S

<b>Key:</b>	All/almost all	** **
	Most	** *
	About half	**
	Some	*
	None/few	
P=Primary		

A plain indication of the areas reported to have been less than satisfactory is also provided in Table 6.6. Some of the full-time students report feeling uncomfortable marking peers. It is reasonable to expect that the part-time students did not report this as an issue because many are employed in the education sector, making it more likely that they would have professional experience in assessment. It is also likely that as many of these same students were experiencing P&SA for the first time they would naturally express a greater need for more time, preparation and experience than the full-time students who had already had experience of this type of P&SA.

Although half of all students perceived P&SA to be fair, relationship bias was highlighted as a potential stumbling block by between most and all of the students. It is apparent from the students' *voices* below, that there was a certain element of underlying

anxiety, which made it difficult for most to all of the students to trust in the ability or resolve of their peers to grade each other objectively. Underpinning this response may have been the deeper recognition that students have of the wider group (classroom) dynamics. For example, as students spend time together (one to several years) they develop relationships amiable or otherwise), which may give rise to real or misguided fear or suspicion of bias. These emotions have the potential to present during an assessment to *shade*, arousing general feeling of trust or distrust in the process, depending on each student's experience and perspective. However, it is important to note that the full-time undergraduate students also reported this to be an issue in the first year of their programme (see Phase One, 2006/07, Chapter 4, Section 4.1.2), as did the undergraduates students in 2007/08 (see Phase One, 2007/08, Chapter 4, Section 4.1.2). The literature sheds light on this finding. For example, Brown *et al* (1997) assert that when assessing peers informally the practice raises little objection, but this situation changes when the assessment is employed in a formal, summative manner. They report that students resist the assessment in this form, because it makes them feel uneasy: reasons they give include students not wanting to take responsibility for making a judgement, preferring an 'expert' to make the judgement, and students finding objective judgement clashes with peer loyalty. They also report that, in extreme cases, peer assessment can weaken student morale within a group context. Notwithstanding this risk, they point out that both self-assessment and peer-assessment are central to many career and life tasks, as well as conferring many educational advantages, such as development of skills in assessment, reflection, independent learning and active learning. Further, they assert that while tutors may not find student involvement in the assessment process easy, it is a necessary step if learners are to be equipped with these skills. While this and other reports in the literature are mostly confined to higher



education, they are not just applicable to this level, but are clearly relevant to all levels of the educational spectrum.

It is important to note here that there is a close correlation between the responses of the final-year full-time students, outlined in Table 6.6, and their responses as first-year students in 2006/07 as illustrated in Chapter 4, Section 4.1.2. Phase One findings also correlate well with the findings of the current part-time undergraduate students as outlined above.

The consensus among the full-time undergraduate students was that P&SA could be suitably introduced to students at primary level, while there was no such consensus among part-time students, whose opinions were divided between introduction at primary or at second-level.

### Student Voices

#### ◦ *Undergraduate Part-Time Learners*

Similar to senior learner Student 36, who held that P&SA assists in realising a sense of direction, Student 48 made it clear that she held no fear of receiving feedback from her peers, accepting that there is always room for improvement. She made the point that *‘by being assessed you decide “am I going to take action on that feedback, am I going to stay the same, am I going to take it somewhere and do something about it”’*. She mentioned previous workplace experience, where despite *not* being supervised during her initial training as a Trainer by her supervisor, she had received profuse praise on the quality of her work. She viewed this uninformed feedback as unacceptable and said she lost *‘faith in the words’* of her supervisor. Experiencing feedback during her project (and the programme overall) she outlined how she had found a way of improving her workplace situation, stating:

*I wasn't getting that [feedback] in my job. I was getting it here when I was studying, I was getting it from meeting with people and interacting, so it met my need there and it motivated me to give those skills back to the people in my company*

In common with Teacher B. and Teacher C., (see Chapter 5, Sections 5.3.2 and 5.3.1) she saw P&SA as *'putting the learning back on the learners'*, suggesting that it is not just about the student handing up a finished piece of work and the teacher marking the work. She continued to say about the responsibility for learning, *'it is really the learning journey, and when you do self- and peer-assessment you are taking that responsibility'*. Contemplating the education system, she pointed to the accepted division between student and teacher at the commencement of school life and that students progress to the next class at the year end and *'whoever passes is the best'*. She believed this situation was in need of reform and there was a need for acceptance *among learners* that they can learn from each other and that they are capable of critical assessment. Furthermore, she thought that the more one engages with the process, the more one can develop the necessary skills to do this. She thought P&SA could facilitate students in becoming more proficient in evaluation, more critically analytical and more self-directed in their learning, stressing that the 'critical' in this context must be seen clearly to refer to constructive criticism. She considered feedback important from the point of view of the learner working collaboratively with peers, when it adds value to the learning, because *'you have your own assumptions and you have somebody else's; you remember that when you go to do something else'*.

In a similar manner to Student 29 (see Section 6.3.3), she considered anonymity in P&SA, especially for providing feedback, as important. Recounting prior experience of another form of P&SA, she considered that earlier assessment to have lost some of its value because of the face-to-face feedback, remarking that this had detracted from the

honesty of it. She said her impression this time was that it was easier to give feedback honestly because it was committed to paper anonymously.

When discussing the advantages and disadvantages of P&SA, Student 48 reported gaining an insight into oneself *'through the eyes of others,'* and learning that peers may *'see you in one way and you are not aware of it'*. She also noted it an advantage that when grappling with a problem both solace and solution can be found through peer feedback. However, she remarked that learners are not aware of the *'value'* of P&SA, misconstruing it to be *'personal, and not a learning experience'*.

She expressed an opinion that final-year undergraduates could gain from P&SA, but students at other (earlier) levels could benefit, suggesting that, prior to assessment, they could:

- (a) take part in brainstorming to develop greater understanding of the nature and components of P&SA
- (b) formally explore the benefits, impact and disadvantages of this assessment practice
- (c) experience a number of trials to gain confidence in self and the assessment, and then
- (d) after the assessment, critically reflect on the process

She could see the benefit of continuing with P&SA and felt *'it is just changing the culture of how you look at yourself and the way you learn'* and that familiarity would allow students to feel comfortable with the assessment style. She commented that she would be in favour of using P&SA summatively as well as in a learning format.

Student 45 was aware that P&SA had encouraged interactivity and had applied a certain motivational pressure of needing to live up to the expectations set by his group in their assessment criteria. He reported that there was an *'agreed standard and agreed rules that we made out ourselves – self imposed, not outside imposed, so it was fair and balanced'*. Because of this, he saw the criteria were unambiguous, helping group members to maintain focus. He observed a change in his peers *'in terms of their commitment to . . . the whole process . . . made them more conscious of their commitments to the group . . . both individually and collectively'*. This finding is bolstered by the literature where, for instance, McDowell and Sambell (1999) hold that student selection of some element of the assessment leads to students feeling more engaged in and in charge of the project. In relation to his own learning, Student 45 described the following benefits:

► *Personal Development*

- realised not all positives in life – negatives as well
- identified strengths and weaknesses
- assists in focus, direction or goal identification

► *Peer Learning*

- through both class and group discussion
- through observation of other group members, and their different approaches to tasks and other skills they draw on, which one can apply oneself
- through critical thinking and discussing course work

Further to Student 45's last point, Cottrell (2005: 12) contends that when learners further their critical thinking capacity, they increase their 'mental muscle'.

Expressing a preference for working in a group which was self- and peer-assessed, Student 45 said it was a fairer assessment. He explained that when a group project is graded solely by the tutor, not everyone in the group may have contributed equally, which can result in other group members having '*to carry that person*'. He summed up his feelings toward his peers '*measuring and assessing*' him, saying '*I think it stands tall over anything else*'. He said he had no doubt that the assessment raises an '*awareness of your own strengths and weaknesses*'. He saw the selection and agreement of criteria to have stood the group in good stead, believing this would not have been the case had the criteria been imposed externally. He felt that in selecting own criteria the group members had to '*agree on certain things . . . learning to agree and to have a structure*', which he viewed as a necessary part of the group's learning. That said, he cautioned that although setting the assessment criteria was an advantage, some members may not be able to attain the set standard, which could then become a source of conflict.

Questioning the honesty within the group, he spoke about the tendency for relationships to develop in the group, but he expected that, without offence, his peers could be '*critically objective*' and forthright with him. For his part, he said that given the opportunity he would make changes, saying '*for myself if I was to do it again I'd be totally honest with people and up front*'.

Pointing to an area he believed could be improved on, Student 45 said he would prefer to raise the assessment in greater detail at an early stage in a class. This would allow a more comprehensive understanding and would also allow students to become more familiar with the '*mathematics*' of the assessment, which he believed caused confusion and anxiety among the students. Own observations showed that there was a level of confusion, which did not manifest itself until the part-time students had received their

grades and feedback. This aspect is discussed in more detail at the end of this Section (following Undergraduate Full-Time Learners).

The selection of own criteria was also viewed to be a positive aspect of P&SA by Student 47. She observed that it had been a '*good boundary*' for the group, but described a lack of expertise and viewed that, due to work commitments and the pressure of academic work, the introduction of this style of assessment was an unwelcome source of further pressure. She held strong views on her experience and pointed out that while peer-assessment did not make an appreciable difference to her marks, she was surprised by the feedback. She described disappointment that her group members had not arranged to award an '*agreed*' set of marks, explaining '*my experience was when I proffered that [to agree marks] it wasn't taken up on. So that was a learning experience for me. I saw things totally differently obviously than the other people in the group*'.

She explained that she felt that negative feedback can be rooted in '*competition, personality clashes maybe, the dynamics, just clashes . . . all of those things come into play, and it wouldn't matter if you turned yourself inside out in some cases*'. She pointed to the potential for conflict between personalities within the group as a primary drawback of the assessment. Expressing a preference for working in a group where the teacher awarded the grades, she observed it to be a healthier climate because it was not necessary '*to walk on egg shells around anybody*'. Despite misgivings, she felt that P&SA could be supportive and of value in certain situations, describing it as an invaluable means for providing students with an insight into interpersonal relationships and the '*politics of a working environment*'. She viewed this knowledge and understanding to be important to second and third-level students, individuals who are without work experience and students and educators in enterprise education. Singling

out transition year students, she maintained P&SA would be very beneficial to learners at that stage because it would act as a foundation for future learning and it would help build maturity. It is useful here to note that Wlodkowski (2008: 98) defines maturity as ‘the ability to make responsible decisions on a regular basis with consideration of their consequences for the welfare of others as well as oneself’.

Student 46 said he found the process enjoyable and that the work ran smoothly, which he observed may have been because the group comprised ‘*dominant people*’ and ‘*everyone sort of said, yes that is the way we are moving forward*’. He saw himself as more independent, but also able to contribute in a group-based situation. During group-based activity, he thought the lecturer should be the one to appoint students to groups, seeing more to be gained from this situation because self-selected groups may be open to the likelihood of getting ‘*into a comfort and safety zone*’, which can detract from their learning.

Discussing advantages of P&SA, he remarked that it afforded an insight into peers’ strengths and weaknesses and an awareness of one’s learning derived from peers.

However, he also observed that students do not like to engage in this form of assessment because of friendships which have developed: he described an unwillingness within the group to award a low grade because students ‘*want to succeed and get their qualification out of it and they don't want to let people down*’. He also acknowledged the potential for awarding lower grades ‘*if someone just doesn't get on with somebody*’, despite the individual’s satisfactory contribution. However, he pointed to one ‘*very honest*’ group member who, through illness, believed she had not been in a position to contribute fully to the group project. Despite all intervention to persuade this student that she had contributed in other ways and deserved a higher grade, she would not be dissuaded from grading herself according to what she believed she deserved, which was

a lower mark. He commented that self-assessment is dependent on one's conscience, which he considered '*means that normally you just give yourself full [marks]*' explaining, '*the way I look at it is, it is all about the qualification at the end: if you could do anything to better yourself, you are going to give yourself top marks*'. He acknowledged again that in the case of that group member, she had chosen not to follow that route.

As a way of improving objectivity, Student 46 suggested that if one was in a position to conduct the assessment at home it would allow more time to consider how one was grading. It would further help by providing an area away from the classroom and the situation where group members were anxiously preparing for a group presentation. Another suggestion was that as many of his peers did not understand rubrics or criteria and associated assessment with school and '*the teacher just ticking*', it would familiarise students with the concept of using rubrics if this was introduced in year one.

He also suggested the compilation of a short *reflective report* on the *process* or a *reflective journal* to recount experience of the *process*, but added the caution that the *academic* side of the report could result in anxiety for some students. He envisaged this would include peer to peer feedback and self-assessment, but without the element of formal grading. He thought that this could allow students to '*see how they are on the night*' and also give the teacher an insight into how the group members were progressing.

In relation to the workplace, Student 46 described introducing P&SA to his students, reporting that they had experienced similar feelings of reluctance to carry out the assessment, believing they would mark their friends more leniently. He described that even though they did not like carrying out the assessment '*it is part of getting used to it*



*in life*'. He observed some students to be very objective. In addressing their fears he said he told his students to try to understand that they were working as part of a team and that in future this would be part of their working life, which necessitates having the ability to '*speak up for yourself*'. To bolster their learning during P&SA, he encouraged students to provide some reflections to provide a rationale for the grades they allocated. He said that he observed this to provide more learning for his students.

When asked what age he thought appropriate to introduce P&SA, Student 46 explained he had had no experience of P&SA prior to his college programme. He felt '*primary school children were young to understand the concept*' and, at that level, friendship issues would prove challenging. He perceived that students in second-level education would have more of a focus on careers and, with correct induction, they would be in a position to appreciate the benefits, which they could then carry with them into higher education.

Student 48, in contrast, considered the assessment applicable to students of nine and ten years old, with the stipulation that it was introduced in a simple way together with a clear explanation of the reasoning behind it. Student 45 also felt P&SA could be introduced at an early age into education, and had started employing this form of assessment with his students who were aged between ten and twelve years old. He stated that the learners were *assessing themselves as individuals on what they've learned and also assessing the group process, how they worked in a group*'. He judged that if the assessment was offered to primary students in a simplistic and an age-appropriate manner, it could be successful. He envisaged the assessment would be '*based on a set criteria for them, so they know exactly what they are evaluating . . . they are not evaluating the person, they're just evaluating the work that people put in together*'. He also envisaged that, working together in small groups at a young age,

students could, over time, become familiar with members of the group and they could *'bond together longer'*. Student 45 viewed this setting would not only encourage effective use of P&SA, but believed that in this context *'people would be open and very honest with each other'*.

- *Undergraduate Full-Time Learners*

Acknowledging it as his first time to experience P&SA, Student 49 (referred to as Teacher J in Section 5.3.4) said it had affected his motivation greatly and had helped with directing his learning effectively. He thought P&SA was a constructive development and wished to see it further developed and used throughout the years in higher education. He felt that with maturity the student population would develop a greater appreciation of the practice.

In terms of group-based activity, Student 50 found P&SA to impact positively on her work ethic. Describing herself as a person who sets high standards, she reported feeling satisfied in the knowledge that her peers would also have to set similar standards: this provided her with the confidence to invest greater effort because she believed her input would be valued. When asked if she had noticed any change in peer interactivity as a result of P&SA, she said she had observed that there had been a development since first year, remarking that *'people realised the effects of the peer- and self-assessments, that they can't get away with being lazy in the class and that they need to have a stronger work ethic. So I think it has improved people's performance in the group'*. She later linked the increased performance to a desire to meet peer expectations, saying *'they know exactly what you have done'*. She also mentioned that one's ability to carry out P&SA develops with experience. She alluded to the teacher-only grading of group projects and commented that she still considered P&SA to be fairer, because *'the teacher will never know the dynamics of the group and who has worked'*. She pointed

to the advantage of being in a position to grade her peers anonymously, feeling that she could be objective and grade according to merit without risking personal relationships, which were important to keep, especially as group projects have a short life. She voiced a fear for the future of becoming involved in a group-based activity without P&SA. Viewing this with trepidation, she said *'I am going to find that very difficult to comprehend that I don't have an input into the mark'*. She outlined the advantages of P&SA as:

- Self-direction in learning
- Learning from self
- Devoting space and time to self reflection
- Awareness of mistakes
- Awareness of personal contribution
- Improving on past performance
- Improving self *learning* for the future

When Student 51 was asked if she had noticed any progression in how she approached P&SA in her final year, she replied saying that she saw P&SA as part of her professional development. She said she did the same in her final year as she did in first year: she put herself in the *'role of a teacher'* and approached the assessment in a professional manner. Remembering her initial response in first year, she recalled thinking *'new concept . . . actually a good idea . . . something I wouldn't have thought about myself, but I could see the reason it was done'*. She mentioned enjoying P&SA and said it had helped her to *'feel good'* about herself. She also said she looked on P&SA as a *'very good tool'* because it *'has to contribute to working independently, it's nearly forcing you in a way to take responsibility for your work'*. Speaking about motivation, she pointed out that because there was a commitment to peers there was a

reluctance to let them down, and that the knowledge that peers would be grading meant one worked to a higher standard, to the best of one's ability. The significance of impressing peers and seeking their approval is highlighted, as already discussed in Section 4.2, by Fawcett (2005).

Expressing an appreciation for having had the chance to put herself in the '*role of judge*', Student 51 said she recognised the value of being in a position to evaluate her own judgement in '*in a very kind of professional way*'. She believed this experience obliged one to take stock of oneself, which she acknowledged demanded hard work, but felt '*it encourages you to look at yourself and reflect on it about yourself*'. In describing the assessment practice as very worthwhile, she expressed the concern that '*students don't realise how valuable it is*'. Continuing to extol the benefits of P&SA, she suggested that it had added value beyond that of teacher only grading. She said the reason for her opinion was because,

*it does motivate people to go the extra mile, possibly because they know there's definite consequences from their peers, which would impact on them more, I think, than from the lecturer, because the peers see everything . . . but the lecturer doesn't, so it's even more valuable I think.*

She also felt P&SA could support self-directed learning, and remarked that it definitely has the capacity to motivate, wondering, in the absence of P&SA, '*would the same results happen?*' When asked further about the benefits of P&SA, Student 51 said that as the assessment called for self reflection and self evaluation it can be summed up as '*assessment for learning*', and continued to remark '*you can say, well, how honestly did I do that?*' Suggesting that P&SA should be continued, she viewed the assessment would be appropriate to second-level education (around sixteen years of age), stating there needed to be a visible step up for students between the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate educational levels. At the present time in second-level education,

she thought the latter students *'are treated very much like children'* and believed that if P&SA was introduced it would act as a preparation for their future in college and for their life overall. She strongly urged that these students should be afforded the chance to take a greater degree of responsibility, but acknowledged that they would have to be provided with it. In the circumstances described, she thought that the students would respond maturely. Student 51's perception of second-level students needing to experience a sense of taking responsibility is in line with the opinion of Ireson (1999), as discussed previously (see Section 6.3.4) and the NCCA (2010) (see Section 2.10.2). While initially expressing the opinion that primary school students would not be sufficiently mature, she felt that when it came down to P&SA, these students could be the most objective and probably the most honest. She provided an explanation for her answer, commenting *'their lives haven't coloured so much by different issues - children, particularly younger children would speak from the heart. There's no issues going on, they just tell it like it is'*. In order to embrace P&SA effectively within a group-based activity, Student 51 held that each group member must own a level of maturity and self-discipline. In addition, she outlined the following steps would help facilitate them in adapting to the assessment practice:

- ▶ Use graduated approach to P&SA
  - Emphasise assessment for learning
  - Maximise feedback
  - Provide theory and give plentiful practice
- ▶ Discuss P&SA and background (formative and summative assessment)
  - Provide comprehensive overview of the concept of P&SA
  - Highlight the *value* of P&SA as a learning aid
- ▶ Incorporate P&SA into *Assessment* modules
  - Place in, or link to, *Assessment for Learning* modules
- ▶ Use graduated withdrawal of *extra* training support to facilitate autonomy in assessment

The assessment proved to be an unsatisfactory experience for Student 52, who recounted that she did not perceive P&SA to have any advantages because *'people are not threatened'*. She remarked that some students appear to achieve grades regardless of attendance or contribution, saying that this was an unfair practice. She attributed the situation to the influence of relationships in the class and explained that there was an attitude of *'let's get the maximum and let's put everybody down as "excellent"'*. However, she qualified her statement by adding that she did not believe this to be the overall consensus in the classroom. She observed that in other college departments, students are obliged to *'swipe in and have to [provide a] signature'*, which she considered might help to assuage this situation. However, she acknowledged that this measure should not be warranted by adult students. Self-assessment caused Student 52 a level of anxiety. She felt it entailed a certain focus on herself, which she was reluctant to do, saying *'I would be less likely to say "Oh, I was great at this" and give myself full marks'*.

When asked if she had learned anything from the experience of P&SA, Student 52 responded that she had learned from the experience, but it was in a *'negative sense'* in that she had not expected students in third-level education to act in the way she had observed in her peers (arranged marking). She did point out that she had no particular liking for group-based activity. When discussing the appropriate educational level at which to introduce P&SA, Student 52 said she would choose higher education. She suggested part-time undergraduate learners, who as fee paying students, and who are possibly subsidised by their organisation, would adapt to P&SA more easily and with more honesty than full-time students, because the full-time students *'only see "I have to get through this year, it doesn't matter, we try and get the highest marks"'*. She expressed the view that she held high moral principles, and a concern that if this

practice of assessment was introduced in primary or second-level education, some learners could suffer alienation *'if you didn't vote [grade] the way people wanted you to vote [grade]'*. In a case like this, she reported it can be *'very difficult to work in that situation'*. She held the view that P&SA should not be continued.

Student 52's anxiety, in relation to friendship bias, agreed marking and alienation of students (with the potential consequential bullying), have also been noted in students' responses across the broad spectrum of the studies (See Table 6.7 in Section 6.3.6 below). In recognising that there are many impacts on students' responses, a broader view is also included from McDowell and Sambell (1999: 80) who argue that *'there are good reasons for students to accept and benefit from innovative assessment but their initial reactions may be negative, even hostile'*.

Marking peers caused some concern for Student 53 who reported feeling anxious about her level of experience to mark, knowing that how one was grading could affect her peers overall grade. She articulated the expectation that, although the assessment appeared fair in first year, by the final-year students would have become more familiar with each other and the assessment would be fairer. However, to her express surprise, the converse appeared to be the case as she stated:

*funny that they should have been fair in the past when people didn't know each other . . . where people do know each other better . . . they're sneakily trying to get more marks for themselves by bringing other people down . . . anecdotally, I've heard a lot of that going on this year.*

and

*on the issues of ethics . . . and this is the first time that it has happened, but there was a suggestion by somebody in the group that "look this is worth . . . twenty percent . . . I think everybody should get that twenty percent. We're in our final year and . . . we all can get that twenty percent by just giving everybody top marks".*

In discussing the latter point, in relation to her group, she expressed personal honesty, saying she had marked according to merit. She offered that a possible way of counteracting this situation would be for the teacher to monitor groups more actively.

Speaking about motivation and the impact of P&SA, Student 53 said that she found it motivating and that it would encourage her to take more interest and look in more depth at her work. One of her reasons was that she likened being assessed in the group to belonging to a small working community and being assessed by that community. With no academic assessor's input, her community of peers chose the assessment criteria and provided multiple individual, personal evaluative reflections on her work. All of this she considered to be necessary for a future career. As a counterpoint, she saw the possibility that the multiple evaluations could also act to demotivate, but recognised that this in itself promotes reflection on working with others.

She saw other benefits as:

- ▶ Working with others enhances peer learning, and also, because of the many perspectives gained, broadens one's point of view on the learning matter
- ▶ P&SA increases self-confidence, particularly in young, shy students because each group member takes part in discussions and decisions, speaks and is listened to, and listens in turn, giving due consideration to the points of view of others
- ▶ Working collaboratively in a group and the input into assessment criteria allows a fairer assessment of people with skills other than traditional academic, such as *'social skills or collaboration skills, or their research skills'*
- ▶ The criteria choice and the assessment promote the learning of responsibility, which is strengthened with practice



Similar to Student 45, she felt that some students did not fully understand how the marks were calculated. She thought that it would benefit students to have a clearer explanation of the mathematics involved to ensure comprehension.

Student 53 said she would like to see P&SA continued and considered that it would be appropriate to introduce this practice of assessment in a '*fun way*' in primary education, at around the age of nine or ten years. Over time she thought the complexity could be gently increased, viewing that P&SA could help to '*bridge gaps between people, and help with social issues [such as] bullying*'. If P&SA were introduced at this early stage in education, she felt it would become second nature to learners, and they would naturally learn to feel accountable through the selection of criteria. Over time, she thought that initial, concrete criteria, based on categories such as 'attendance' and 'contribution to project work', could gradually evolve into higher order, less tangible concepts, such as commitment to the team. She believed this could lead to both team-based learning and team building, with the latter including '*learning to interact, they [students] are learning to cross barriers between cultures and races and abilities*'.

'*Good angel, bad angel*' was a term used by Student 56 to describe the human condition, where tension exists between '*I don't like that person, so I'm going to . . . be really bad and give three when they deserve a five, so I'll just give them four*' and '*trying to be morally objective*'. She said to grade self and peers effectively one needed to be '*fair, honest and observant*', which she believed required the skill to '*focus*' on (a) what was being assessed and (b) maintaining an ethical evaluation of what was being graded. This was important to her because as a future educator, she wanted to be in a position to separate '*personal behaviour, to acknowledge the factors that are impacting on that person's behaviour*' from one's relationship with that individual.

She perceived a lack of appreciation of the assessment among her peers and believed P&SA needed to be '*communicated*' to a greater degree throughout all years of the degree programme. She considered that more practice and experience was necessary, in order to allow the assessment practice to become part of the '*lexicon of your experiences*'. Discussing the teacher's role in assessment, Student 56, said '*I consider the lecturer to be kind of expert; again . . . I'm trying to unlearn that behaviour and see that it [assessment] doesn't have to be expert led*'. She spoke of her difficulty in accepting peers as legitimate assessors because she was '*used to being marked by the expert [teacher/external assessor], valued by the expert*'. Relating this to power, she explained that there is a degree of vulnerability in handing that '*power*' over to one's peers. She described how from her point of view, this manifested itself as concern with marking her peers, saying '*I didn't feel that I had the right to mark someone else's behaviour, work or whatever*'.

In relation to her learning, she observed that with the P&SA she had been engaged and conscious of how she was communicating with and relating to other group members. An advantage of the assessment she had already noted, practice and learning in assessment, she viewed as necessary for her future as an educator. This aspect was important to Student 56 because she found it personally difficult to assess someone's work, to allocate it a '*value*'. She described it as '*a practice in discipline of marking*'. She noted a disadvantage to be that '*power inherent in the peer-assessment can be abused and . . . can become a personality contest . . . people conflict in the group, they may have a clash with somebody and not see what the person's contributing or isn't*'. When asked if she saw a way to resolve this situation, Student 56 suggested the use of role play (drawing on the learner's imagination). She envisaged that students would act out the role of evaluator with an explicit instruction to perform this role honestly and

objectively. During the role play, the teacher could provide guidance, providing a clear outline of the purpose of the role play, the concept of P&SA, the necessity of maintaining objectivity in an assessment and the value of these factors for the future educator.

Student 56 thought P&SA could be introduced at a very early stage in education, commenting that it could be applicable to junior infants. By presenting at this early stage, she maintained '*it just becomes an innate ability*'. She added that this would also have an added advantage for young students because they are not as afraid of '*handing over control*'. Commenting further, Student 56 described children as possessing more of a sense of fair play and integrity overall than adults, and she believed that *if you can harness that into that experience [P&SA] . . . it follows with you all the way through*'. However, she stipulated the assessment would have to be communicated positively to the students.

Student 55, who held similar views to Student 56, said that having experienced P&SA several times, she was now of the opinion that there was a visible divide among peers. She went into detail on this, explaining that the '*group is divided over just doing it and giving everybody four [full marks] and actually doing it properly*'. She considered that this situation may exist because of a general lack of understanding of the concept of P&SA, and that her peers had yet to grasp the fact that '*the idea behind it [P&SA] is to help you develop and grow*'. She voiced general frustration that on the one hand you have the drawback of students not making proper use of the assessment, and on the other hand you have the benefit that, if approached in a correct manner, P&SA '*can help guide you to where you need to be*'. When asked if there was a way of improving this situation, Student 55 said it could help if it was put '*in plain English, that it's to do with your development, your growth, how you work within a group context and how*

*your see yourself working within a group context*'. In return for carrying out the P&SA as it is intended, she perceived that the students would gain more than they fear losing. She believed students would learn more about themselves, gain knowledge of how one learns and what is needed to improve on areas of weakness. This she compared to their feared losses, the having to expend the time and effort to engage in the assessment rather than just keep the view that *'it's a stupid thing, let's just get rid of it'*.

In relation to her own learning, she liked being in a position to have input into the selection of the assessment criteria design. She also reported experiencing a positive effect on her confidence, saying she gained knowledge of areas she needed to work on in order to further her development. She felt that as a result of the P&SA experience she was encouraged to take a deeper look at her reasoning and her way of working. This was said to be important because she felt that some individuals can become rigid in their thinking and can cling to an attitude of *I'm doing it my way, it's the right way*', which she considered a stumbling block to progress. She observed a change in her manner of working. Describing the change as a subtle effect, she explained the difference by saying, *'I suppose not better, but more critically within a group sense'*. She was aware that having the investment of her peers provided motivation to try harder and encouraged her to take greater strides. She remarked that the value of this aspect of P&SA was that peers can provide that extra incentive, *'if you don't have that little bit extra, that would push you up'*. Her observation is in accordance with the observation of Kuhl and Fuhrmann (1998) who argue that in some cases, self-determining behaviour, due to ill-fitting self-concepts, may not make it possible to follow personal goals for one's own sake. However, they assert that there are some instances when, to allow for the attainment of personal goals, which are both valuable to the self and society, *'one needs to be gently pushed into activities that one would not initiate*

*spontaneously*'. They maintain this outlook is necessary 'in order to make new experiences, part of which may later be integrated into one's self' (p 17).

Transition year in second-level education was perceived by Student 55 as the appropriate stage for students to engage with the process of P&SA. She held that, at this stage, students could learn to understand and become familiar with the assessment, which they could then use to their advantage in higher education. If introduced at this stage, Student 55 felt students would be fairer, maintaining that there was a link between honesty and the stakes involved in the assessment. Although she spoke of the link between honesty and '*high stakes*', she thought that if students understood more the concept of P&SA '*they would actually be more open to it [P&SA] and for developing the change*'. She concluded by describing primary school students as being too young to understand P&SA, but was open to changing her mind.

Student 54's experience of P&SA was a positive one. He expressed the view that his confidence had been undeniably improved. Describing his impression of the experience, he said '*it was a huge change. I've never been asked something like that before in education. How do I feel I did and actually to assess myself and really evaluate on how I did*'. He enjoyed self-assessment, which he described as motivating, suggesting that in the case of handing work to a teacher for assessment, they can never know the effort that had been involved in completing the work. He continued to say that as a result of conducting P&SA, he felt he had '*critically evaluated*' his work and held a '*critical appreciation*' of his standards. He added further '*I definitely pulled my weight and had to become more independent and be more self-directed*'. Had he not acted in this way, he said he would have felt a sense of frustration and anger. He provided an example of his first experience of P&SA as a first-year student, stating:

*There's nobody harsher, no harsher critic than yourself . . . there were a few times when I thought, I should have done a little bit more and I was left extremely disappointed, particularly in first year, three years ago when I could have done more, but because of whatever reason I just didn't and it was okay at the time, but then when it actually came to me evaluating myself it wasn't so easy to do on why didn't I because it is so important to me this course, for education in general. Why didn't I pull my weight like, I couldn't see any reasoning behind that one, so therefore I was very disappointed, but motivated next time to pull up my sleeves and try harder.*

He considered that that it had been a 'brilliant' experience to have been in a position to assess oneself and one's peers. He noticed that it had a positive affect on the interaction and performance within his group, reasoning that, *'you have to pull your weight and you have to be seen to be pulling your weight*. He believed it was fair because the criteria had been selected, based on what the group members decided were needed, which he thought to be very easy. He explained this was because:

*. . . the self- and peer-assessment was always, directed at us . . . there wasn't anything I found particularly that I couldn't understand or I couldn't mark the student because I'd never been involved, like 'cause I didn't have the knowledge as the lecturer would have . . . because everything was directed directly at how we work with the students and stuff that was on our own level.*

He thought that in general his peers were 'relatively honest', but believed that there may have been a tendency to mark more leniently because of the influence of relationships within the group, saying *'I think there was always a little bit added on or taken away because of relationships'*. When asked if there was any way around this situation, he offered maybe separating students and allowing more time to complete the assessment forms, or allowing students the opportunity to complete assessment in the privacy of their home. This he saw would help assuage fears that peers might gain knowledge of the grades awarded. Completing the assessment away from the distraction of peers and being in a position to return the assessment form in private, he envisaged as a practical way of both increasing student honesty and lessening the fear of peer conflict. Student

54 reasoned these as necessary steps, and reasoned this was because *'if your friends see that you docked them, your relationship is definitely gonna be tarnished'*.

He would have welcomed the chance to experience P&SA prior to third-level education. He acknowledged that the standard of the assessment he had just experienced was high, but that this standard, if reduced to a much simpler level, could be introduced at the commencement of primary school. He thought this could be done with confidence *'because in its simplest level self- and peer-assessment is looking at how you did and how, if you're in a group, how others did and I think anybody can do that and I think it has value for anybody'*. He foresaw that that this might have teething problems, and there may be other associated issues in relation to the fairness and objectivity of P&SA. For instance, he acknowledged that the students may not all be *'a hundred percent honest'*. However, he said some students would be honest *'so, therefore, it would have value, and I think that honesty would grow'*.

To return to the issue of confusion surrounding the calculation of the assessment grades, which was been raised in Section 6.3.5). It is important to note that this was a first time for many of the part-time students to experience P&SA and this grade was contributing to their overall final grade. The calculation of marks served to intensify an already heightened level of anxiety, which needed to be addressed to allay fears. The computation, which had been included as an element of the students' P&SA workshop (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.5) had not caused any issues to be brought up at the time of the workshop. This may have been because it did not immediately impinge on the students, and its full meaning would not have been felt until they received their grades. As both the formative and summative components entailed grading to a five point scale (see Chapter 3, Section 3.5.5) it did hold the potential to confuse. The confusion may also have been exacerbated by an expectation of a certain P&SA mark, which did not

materialise. For example, Student 55 provides an illustration of how it is possible for confusion to arise when students receive their feedback, as she points out that,

*Some [students] play the mind game of “Let’s just give everybody four, that way everybody passes in the group”, but yet when you have that piece of paper [assessment form] in your hand, some people could go “Oh, actually, you know . . .” and give a lower mark. They can say one thing and do another.*

Her remarks echo similar comments made by Students 27 who said ‘*actions are purer on the day*’ and Student 23 who spoke about the influence of ‘*conscience*’ (see Section 6.3.5).

However, reassurance and further explanation appeared to restore the students’ confidence at the time. From a teacher’s perspective, the situation emphasises the importance of ensuring *simplicity* in all aspects of P&SA, including the calculation of marks, and the necessity to have students *demonstrate* a comprehensive understanding of the concept and the *nuances* of the assessment.

The part-time students were the only cohort of students to report this difficulty (when they received their grades) and it needs noting that the final-year undergraduates were the only student cohorts where P&SA impacted on their graduation.

In contrast with the part-time undergraduate students, the full-time students did not appear to experience difficulty during or after the time of the assessment. The first time it was brought to my attention was during the study interviews. It must be noted also that the full-time students had experienced P&SA in their first year (2006/07). A field note, recorded during the assessment process in their final year (2008/09), notes the absence of issues:



Students made no particular reference to the P&SA element of their assessment though they understood its impact on their final grade. They acted as though they took it in their stride, and some remarked they were well used to it at that stage.

Assessments carried out during the studies in primary, secondary and further education had no impact on student grades, which began and ended with the assessment experience.

#### *6.3.6 OVERVIEW OF STUDENT INTERVIEWS*

Finally, Table 6.7 below contains an overview of Phase Two findings from all student interviews. It allows for comparison between the educational levels and for further comparison with the findings arising out of Phase One of the research.

**Table 6.7:** Findings – overview of education levels

		Primary	Secondary (urban)	Secondary (rural)	Final-year undergrad (f/t)	Final-year undergrad (p/t)	Early school leavers	Senior learners (urban)	Senior learners (rural)
<i>Benefits</i>	Motivates	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
	Builds confidence	*	**	**	**	**	**	*	**
	Fosters co-operation and interaction	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	
	Facilitates self-direction and responsibility		**	**	**	**		**	
	Promotes self awareness, reflection	**	*	**	**		**	**	
	Gives control, empowers learners	**	**	**	**	*	**	*	
	Can foster honesty, builds objectivity	**			**	**	**		
	Provides practice in judging and assessing	**		**	**		*	*	
	Encourages learning from peers		*	*		**	**	**	
	Assessment method fair	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	
	Preparation for future education	**		*			**	*	
	Peer mark can be biased by relationships		**	**	**	**	**	*	
<i>Issues</i>	Anxiety, difficulty marking self	*	**	*				**	*
	Discomfort marking peers	**		**	*				**
	Need more time, preparation, experience				*	**	*	**	**
<b><i>Appropriate educational level:</i></b>		P	S	S	P	P/S	S	P	

<b>Key:</b>	All/almost all	**
	Most	**
	About half	**
	Some	*
	None/few	
P=Primary		
S=Secondary		

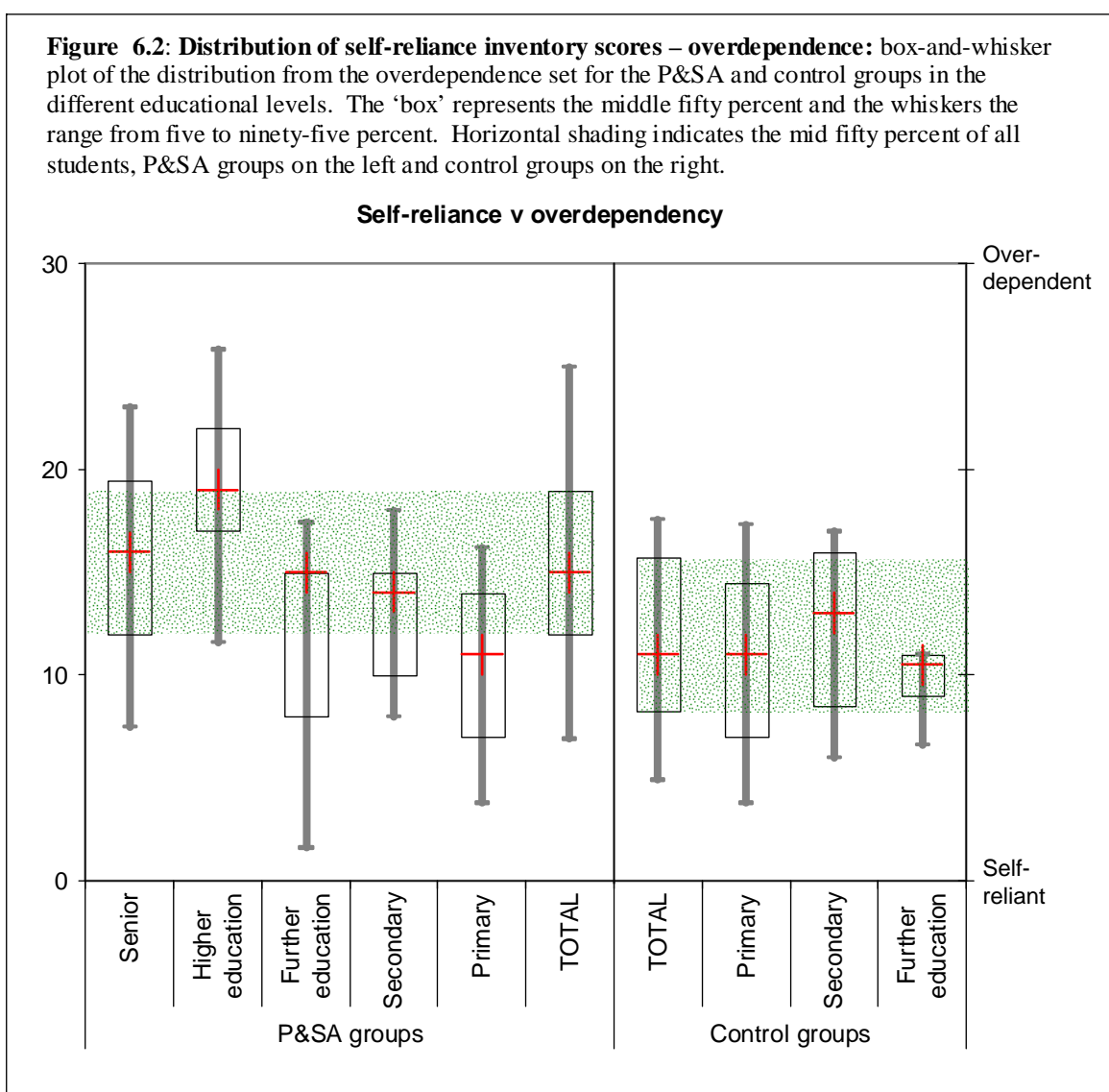
#### 6.4 SELF-RELIANCE INVENTORY RESULTS

At the completion of the studies, each student was asked to complete a questionnaire, which was designed to measure their self-reliance in two specific dimensions, which are self-reliant to overdependent (score = 0-30) and self-reliant to counterdependent (score = 0-50). This survey, originated and tested by Quick, *et al* (1992) and Quick, *et al* (1996), is described in detail in Section 3.6.6. Surveys that were substantially incomplete or incorrect were omitted (surveys where one question was missed by the student, were included with an average score for the missing question. For example if two questions were left blank, the participant's questionnaire was discarded. Where questions were reverse-scored, if the result was within one point, the questionnaire was accepted, but if the scores were opposed (two or more points difference for the same question) that questionnaire was also discarded. For instance, using the same example provided in Section 3.6.6 if the question "*I trust at least two other people to have my best interests at heart*" was scored, say 1 and the question "*I am frequently suspicious of other people's motives and intentions*" was scored 3, 4 or 5 (which on reversing becomes 2, 1 or 0) then this questionnaire was accepted. Conversely, if the second question was scored 0, 1 or 2, which reverses to 5, 4 or 3, the questionnaire was discarded.

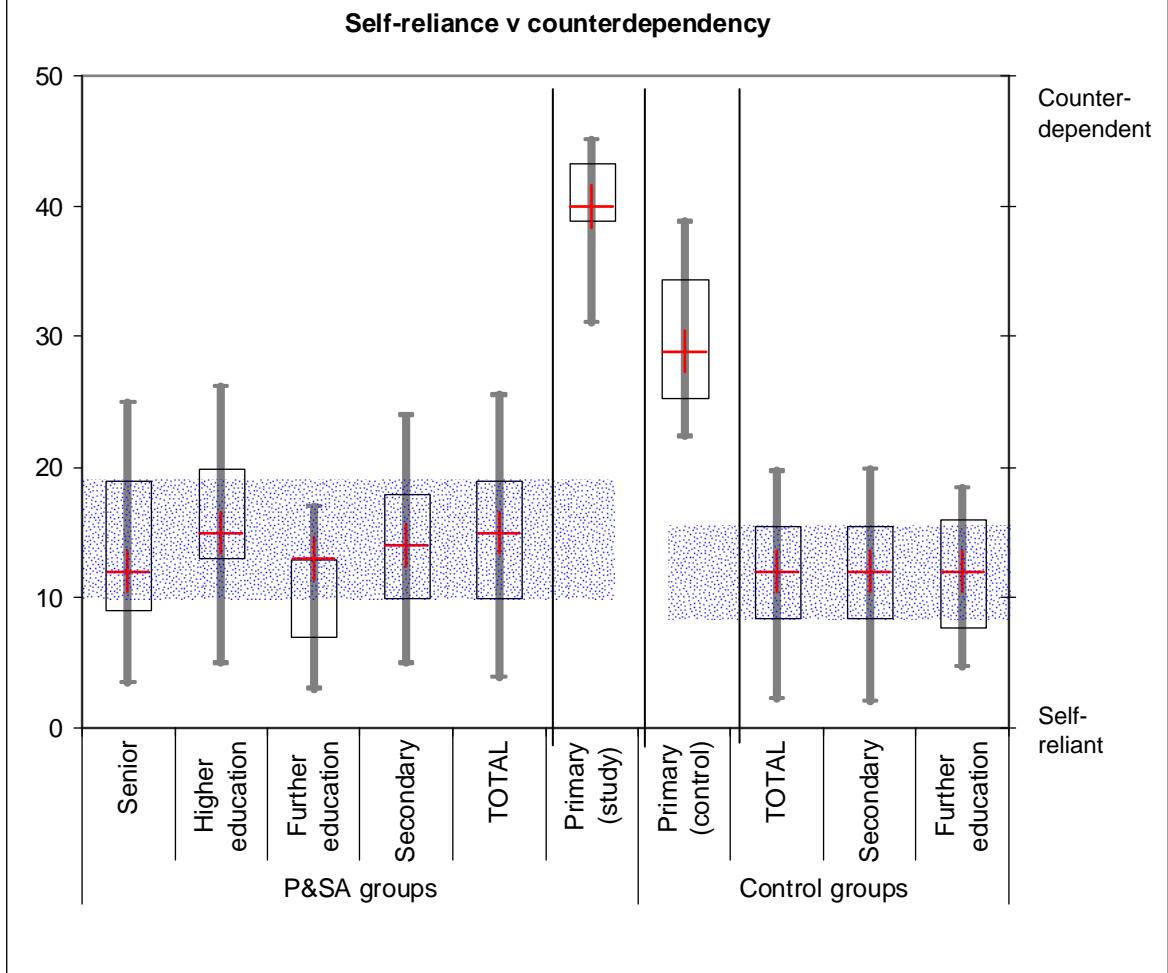
The results for each educational level were grouped together and the range of scores for the middle fifty percent of students shown on the charts as a vertical "box". The range of scores of ninety percent of the students is then provided on the chart by a single vertical line ("whisker").

Figures 6.2 and 6.3 below demonstrate the distribution of scores obtained by the students across the spectrum of educational levels in the two sub-scales described

above. In each case the results gained at the different levels are compared with the total for either the P&SA groups or the control groups. In almost all cases, there is significant overlap between the scores of the middle fifty percent, an indication that no significant difference can be seen. This overlap is also seen between the total of the P&SA groups and the total for the control groups. This finding would appear to indicate that one P&SA episode in one class does not significantly affect the dependency of the students in either direction.



**Figure 6.3: Distribution of self-reliance inventory scores – counterdependence:** box-and-whisker plot of the distribution from the counterdependence set for the P&SA and control groups in the different educational levels. The ‘box’ represents the middle fifty percent and the whiskers the range from five to ninety-five percent. Horizontal shading indicates the mid fifty percent of all students, P&SA groups on the left and control groups on the right. The two outlying groups (chart centre) are the primary school – both P&SA and control groups – counterdependency may be associated with a denial of or striving against existing dependency, which, speculatively, could be attributed to young children learning and developing rapidly.



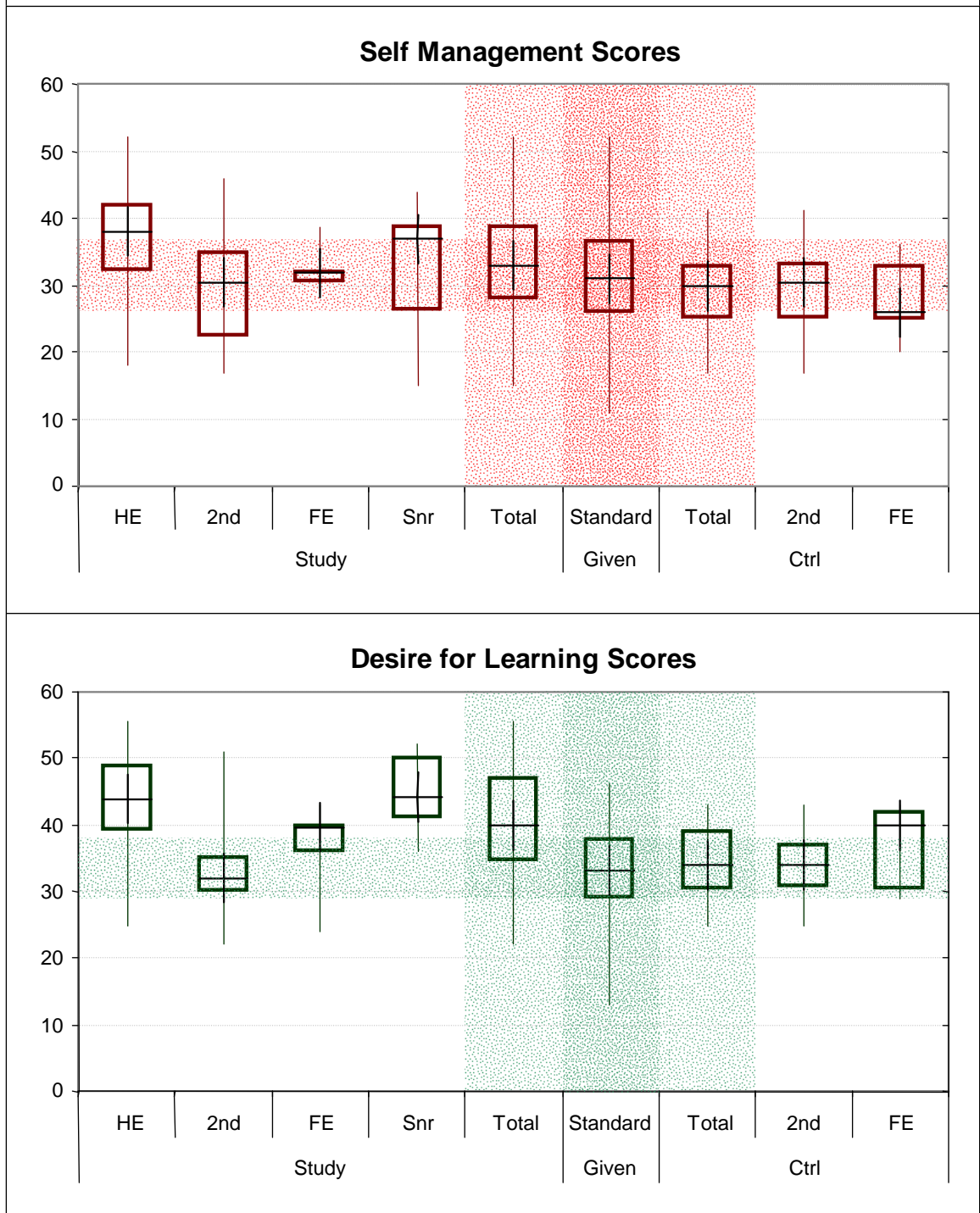
One place where difference is seen is in the responses of the primary school learners, where these show a high score for counterdependence. This appears unremarkable, and might have been easily foreseen, as young children are naturally highly dependent as they are developing. They could also be expected to be striving against this dependence, as they are rapidly developing at this age, and this natural drive to rapid development should reflect the characteristics of counterdependence.

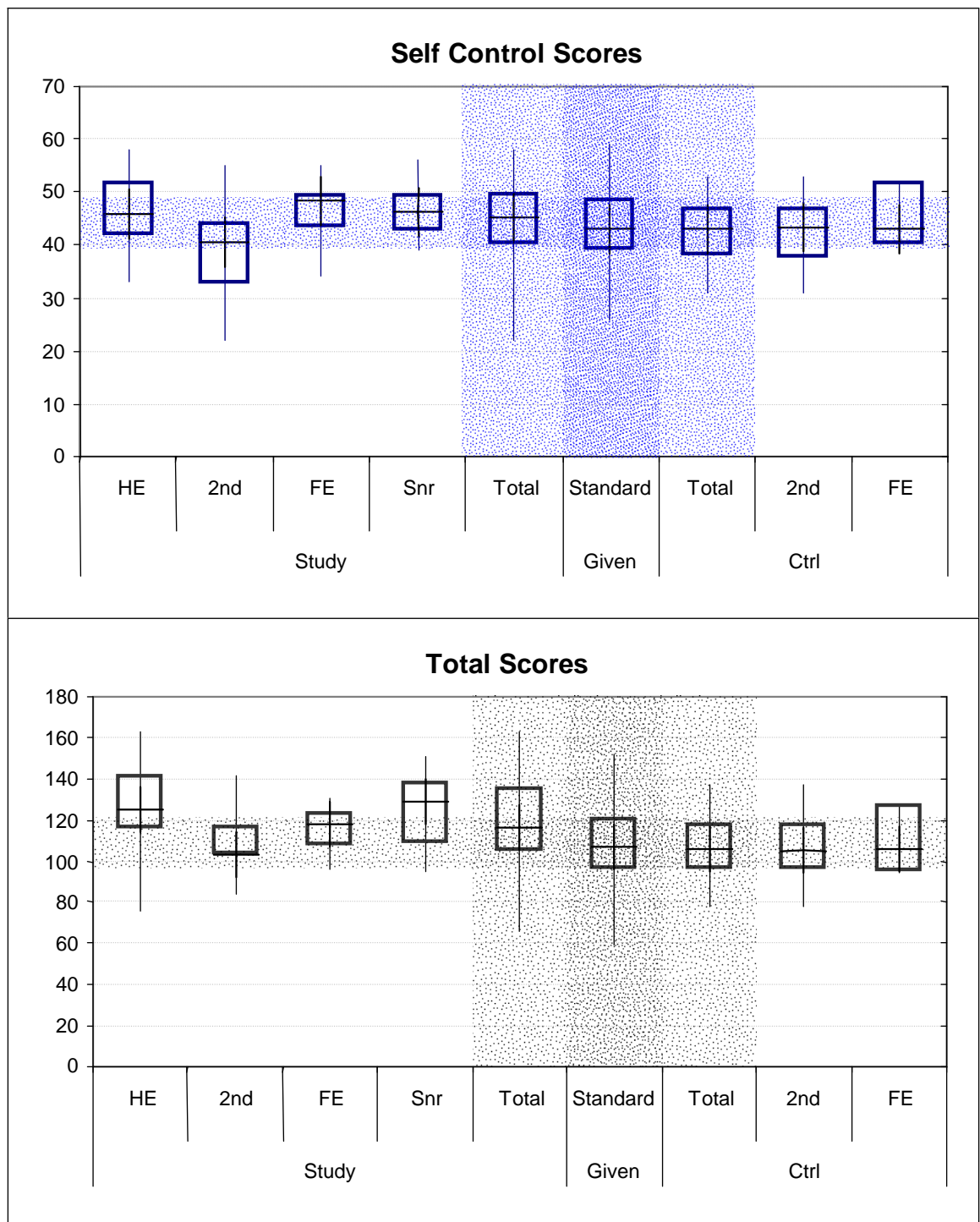
## **6.5      READINESS FOR SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING INVENTORY RESULTS**

With the exception of the primary school students, each student completed a questionnaire, which was designed to measure their readiness for self-directed learning in three specific dimensions. The survey, designed by Fisher *et al* (2001) comprised the dimensions of Self-Management, Desire for Learning and Self-Control. These dimensions were measured on question sub-sets as previously described in detail in Section 3.6.6. The survey questionnaires were checked for completeness, and as the survey comprised forty two questions, there were some mistakes made by students during completion. However, there were few errors, and where these occurred, the errors consisted of items un-scored or items double-scored. Where a maximum of two errors occurred, un-scored items were given the average score for that dimension, and double-scored items were given the average of the two scores (there were no questionnaires discarded).

An illustrative account of the results of this survey is outlined in Figure 6.4

**Figure 6.4: Comparison of readiness for self-directed learning inventory factors** reported by study groups and those reported by control groups compared with the original standard (Fisher, *et al*, 2001). These comparisons are illustrated by educational level and are presented in four charts in the following order: Self Management; Desire for Learning; Self Control; and the Score Totals. The scores for the total population of all study and all control groups are highlighted by the vertical shading while the heavier shading highlights the original standard (Fisher, *et al* 2001) group: horizontal shading highlights the range of scores of the middle fifty percent of the standard group.





The results of the questionnaires measuring the Readiness for Self-Directed Learning Inventory, both regarding the separate factors and the overall total scores, shows the study groups and control groups appear to be from a similar population to that group measured initially by Fisher, *et al* (2001). All figures show that the study groups have a slightly higher score than the 'standard group', whilst the control groups report similar scores to the standard group. The differences in the figures do not appear significant, as



there is considerable overlap in the middle fifty percent range for all totals across all educational levels.

Although no further comparison is available, and differences in scores appear not significant, it would appear that there is at least a good case for arguing that a longer-term, continuous study be made, to determine whether there is a consolidation of the incipient rises in readiness for self-directed learning shown by these measurements.

## **6.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter presents the findings from the students who participated in the research. The results are presented in three parts: findings drawn from interviews held with students during Phase Two of the research; data obtained from the Self-Reliance survey; and finally, the results of the Readiness for Self-Directed Learning survey.

Each section of the chapter begins with a *précis* of the findings from the individual educational level. This is followed, as before to preserve researcher objectivity, by a fuller account of the findings, expressed in the students' own *voices*. A synopsis providing an overview of the students' findings from all educational levels in Phase Two then follows.

The chapter documents evidence which shows that, within a group-based context, students indicate that P&SA enhance their motivation level. This impact on student motivation and other reported tangible benefits, which were observed by the students at the different educational levels, are drawn out and discussed. The benefits explored correlate with those observed by the teachers and co-ordinators in the previous chapter, and those reported in Phase One. Notable additions to the teacher and co-ordinator findings are the first-hand accounts of students' own feelings, which include a

heightened sense of responsibility, improved self-confidence, increased motivation, and a greater feeling of autonomy.

Reported also in the chapter are the drawbacks noted by the students to have posed challenges or concerns for them as a result of their engagement with this form of assessment. These include, in particular, the potential of relationships to bias this assessment practice, and the effects of peer-assessment on friendships within groups. Students' suggestions for ways of combating the reported obstacles are also documented.

Included also is the educational level at which the students who were involved in the study consider it would be appropriate to introduce P&SA into education.

A report of the findings of both the Self-Reliance Inventory and Readiness for Self-Directed Learning Scale surveys concludes the students' findings.

## **7 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

*If research is to be worth the effort, it needs to offer the prospect of going beyond competing ideologies, to offer the possibility of changes in our thinking and practices.*

Zuber-Skerritt 1996:18

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter examines the overall findings from the various strands of the research investigation. It draws together the major, common themes from each phase of the research and from across the spectrum of lifelong learning. In accordance with a phenomenological philosophy, attention is also paid to the minor points of view, recognising the need for inclusivity: as learning is a sociological phenomenon, it applies to all students and any theory of learning must encompass all learners, not just the majority.

These findings are explored in this chapter for their relevance to the learner and to education in general, and their implications for the future of lifelong learning are discussed.

### **7.2 ANALYSIS**

All the evidence collected throughout the research demonstrates strong correlation between both data collected by different methods (survey and interviews), and, data collected from different sources (learners, teachers and co-ordinators participating in the research study and the literature on the subject of P&SA). Triangulation by employing different methods and by using data from different sources adds to the validity of the data. This is suggested by Creswell (2003), who also advocates the use of both ‘rich thick description to convey the findings’ (p 196) as in the use of narrative findings, delivered through quoting the participants own words. Similarly, his call for

transparency to researcher bias is addressed by the use of reflective excerpts from field notes.

### *7.2.1 POSITIVE INFLUENCES*

The findings from Phase One and Phase Two of the research provide clear evidence that, when employed in group-based activity, P&SA can increase student motivation. The import of this finding is clear. Motivation is imperative to lifelong education because it underpins all activity and all progress: the learner has to be motivated, or possess the inherent drive, to continue learning. One of the facets of motivation is deeper engagement of the learner, and the findings would suggest that this was an observable effect during the research.

The evidence also suggests that, as a learning methodology, P&SA are fair and can improve the learner's self-confidence across all levels of education. Furthermore, the evidence supports P&SA to be an assessment practice which can provide students with a sense of empowerment, control, responsibility and self-direction. Educators and students alike envisage that P&SA are relevant to learners' future personal and professional skill sets, perceiving training and practice as necessary to enable them to acquire competence and confidence in the skills of evaluation and assessment, which are essential life skills.

The resultant common positive themes to emerge from the findings, which unite the higher education students in Phase One and all of the students, co-ordinators and teachers in Phase Two, are outlined in Table 7.1.

**Table 7.1:** Emergent broad-spectrum themes – benefits  
Reported benefits of P&SA as a learning methodology as appreciated by all participants in both phases of the research

Motivates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Encouraged deeper learning</li> </ul>
Facilitates self-direction and responsibility
Promotes self-awareness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Increased reflection</li> <li>▶ Develops skills for evaluating strengths and weaknesses objectively</li> </ul>
Fosters co-operation and interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Work of higher standard</li> <li>▶ Increases productivity</li> </ul>
Builds confidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ More self-confidence,</li> <li>▶ Higher self-esteem</li> </ul>
Assessment method fair

Further themes which emerged in common from several participant groups, but which could not be expected to be reported or were not seen by all participant groups are depicted in Table 7.2, together with the particular groups in question and the reason for limited reporting. For example, no inference can be drawn from a theme unreported in Phase One if, due to the different data collection method, a relevant question may not have been asked in Phase One (survey only, no interview). Another instance is where the effect may not have been visible, as was the case with the co-ordinators who were not immediately involved in the classroom activities and therefore could not have witnessed specific effects. Lastly, it may also have been the case that the theme was, significantly, not observed.

**Table 7.2:** Additional general themes – benefits  
Reported benefits of P&SA as a learning methodology, as appreciated by several participant groups

Theme	Group, Reason Reported/Not Reported
Can foster honesty, builds objectivity	Phase One – not asked; Phase Two – common to all
Empowers learners providing ownership of learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Gives control</li> <li>► Cultivates independence</li> </ul>	Phase One – not asked; Phase Two – common to teachers and learners; not visible to co-ordinators
Provides practice in judging and assessing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Showed good judgement – become non-judgemental</li> </ul>	
Encourages learning from peers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Reflection on peers</li> </ul>	Visible to only students (both phases)
Fosters empathising, developing communication skills	Perceived only by co-ordinators and some students in Phase One

In concluding the range of emergent beneficial themes, Table 7.3 includes those reported by only one specific group of participants, which are outlined together with the reporting group.

**Table 7.3:** Themes emerging from a particular group of participants

Theme	Group(s) Reporting
Reduces stress <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► Assists with conflict resolution</li> </ul>	Students, Phase One
Preparation for future education	Students, Phase Two
Fosters sense of equality, justice	Co-ordinators
Natural assessment, students comfortable	
Requires/obtains engagement, investment of each group member	
Demands maturity	Teachers
More variety in assessment types	
Removes ‘us: them’ student-teacher divide	

In relation to the introduction of P&SA into education, the evidence from Phase Two suggests that the majority view arising from all participants is that primary school

would be the level most appropriate. The one caveat emerging is that the young students should be introduced to this assessment practice in a careful and measured, age appropriate manner. This phased introduction should include appropriate monitoring to allow the development of trust, honesty, objectivity and openness, together with safeguards to avoid any negative aspects, such as learner prejudice or bullying.

### *7.2.2 ASSOCIATED ISSUES*

It needs restating that, as a constant comparative approach to the data analysis was employed to draw out the themes reported by the participants, the rigor in coding demanded by GT plus the constraint of *époché* in the IP approach combined to impose a framework on the research (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3.3). Adhering to this methodological structure provided an objective working space in which the data analysis could be conducted as free as possible from subjective bias and with maximum researcher objectivity. This is not always easy or straightforward to achieve. Bias can creep in unnoticed, stemming from the natural perspective one holds of the world. This can manifest in such forms as perceiving the glass ‘half full’ or ‘half empty’, or having a more natural empathy with one interviewee’s view than with another, or holding a presupposition carried forward from earlier research. Throughout the life of the studies it was necessary to be aware of such natural tendencies, and to ensure that no unwarranted preconceptions crept into this objective space.

The chapters outlining the research findings (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), appear to depend substantially on positive participant views in relation to the research question. To ensure that academic rigor was not only maintained, but was visibly so, it is necessary to examine how negative views in the data were extracted and analysed. To this end, a sample interview transcription (chosen at random) and the associated coding is displayed in Appendix G. The views expressed there are, on the whole, positive.

Nevertheless, as may be expected with any new experience, there was express hesitancy in accepting the new assessment procedure: this hesitancy could be interpreted as a negative response, which can be seen in Student 20's response,

*It would have been all right to mark my own work because it is just myself, I don't mind marking my own work, but when it came to marking other people's work I was kind of afraid because I didn't want to give them too low or too high marks or that kind of thing. I was afraid with some people, like if I didn't like them, that might impair my judgement on them or something. But it was all right, it was fine, it didn't actually come to anything bad, I did do it honestly; I did it on the work that they provided and that kind of thing.*

In summary, there were several stages of analysis. Firstly, there was the drawing out of the concepts in this interview by constant comparison with the concepts already drawn from other interviews. Subsequently, there were stages of further comparison and grouping of concepts as described in Chapter 3, Section 3.3.2. To help illustrate this process, the initial and final steps in analysing this passage are provided below in Table 7.4. (These steps are illustrated for the full interview in Appendix G, Tables G.1 and G.2).

**Table 7.4:** Sample analysis depicting initial coding and the resultant themes

<i>Initial coding</i>	<i>Final thematic analysis</i>
<p>Discomfort marking others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ uneasy judging others' work</li> <li>▶ anxious about being biased</li> <li>▶ in fact was honest marking peers on work done</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Discomfort marking peers</li> <li>▶ Peer mark can be biased by relationships</li> <li>▶ Assessment method fair</li> </ul>



Some other interviews also revealed negativity in parts. For example, Student 47, in her response to a question in relation to her perception of interactivity in the group, highlighted how she found P&SA to be a source of unwelcome pressure:

*I think at this juncture, at the very end of two academic years as a part-time student, with the workload and holding down jobs and everything I think peer-assessment at this point, and self-assessment I think at this point there would be an unnecessary pressure at this juncture.*

After analysing the data, it was found that the concept in this statement did not fall readily into an existing category and would thus not appear in the table of findings (see Table 6.6). However, in line with the IP approach, due care was taken to include this, and other similar reported negative experiences, as recounted by the individual participant, in the chapters detailing the findings. This specific example is included above in Student Voices, Section 6.3.5.

Overall, one primary theme emerged from all groups as a concern in the employment of P&SA, and that was the concept of fairness. Although all of the groups, in large proportion, agreed this assessment methodology is fair, there was anxiety expressed by some participants in all groups about the fairness of the assessment. In particular there was angst that marks could be influenced by relationships, particularly friendships, within the group. Groups agreeing marks before the assessment was also noted as a matter of concern. It was observed that younger children may mark harshly and there was some concern that the marking could be a source of conflict. This main theme is portrayed in Table 7.5. The table also depicts the other themes which emerged as issues concerning the use of this assessment style, together with the particular groups in which the issues were reported.

**Table 7.5:** Emergent themes – drawbacks

Drawbacks reported of P&SA as a learning methodology: broad-spectrum theme (reported by all participants in both phases of the research) followed by general themes according to specific groups as indicated

Concerns	Students Phase One	Students Phase Two	Teachers	Co-ordinators
Fairness not guaranteed – difficult but needs monitoring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ peer mark can be biased by relationships</li> <li>▶ groups can agree marking beforehand</li> <li>▶ students can judge severely</li> <li>▶ can cause conflict</li> </ul>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Students need reassurance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ anxiety, difficulty marking self</li> <li>▶ discomfort marking peers</li> <li>▶ anxiety about free riding</li> <li>▶ difficulty relying on others</li> <li>▶ teenage students particularly sensitive –               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ peer pressure</li> <li>▶ hypercritical of self</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	✓	✓		✓
Need more time, preparation, experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Senior students (out of education for long period) need extended time to adjust to assessment</li> </ul>		✓		✓
Challenging for teacher – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ already overloaded</li> <li>▶ no time</li> </ul>			✓	✓
Teacher-facilitated assessment open to parental pressure				✓
Need set standards (for comparison, job qualification)			✓	
Some learners do not like group work			✓	

### 7.2.3 SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AND SELF-RELIANCE – SURVEYS

The evidence from the Readiness for Self-Directed Learning survey showed that, in general, all of the learners, including control groups, were from the same population. Similarly, the Self-Reliance Inventory survey reported no significant differences between the groups with the exception of the Primary school learners who were shown

to be significantly more dependent. Although there are no significant conclusions to be drawn, for the future researcher the figures present an indication of a stable baseline.

A larger population for both the trial groups and the control groups may possibly have shown some significant differences after one P&SA episode, although this is unlikely. From the obviously significant result of the dependence of younger, primary learners, it appears reasonable to assume that any differences that do occur will show up more clearly over a longer duration of consistent use of P&SA.

### **7.3 DISCUSSION**

Democracy and inclusivity are contemporary foundation principles of education. The research, findings and all themes emerging in the subsequent analysis rest on the intention of empowering and equipping the learner to lead a proactive role on a local and global scale. This outlook underpins a learner-teacher partnership approach to assessment which employs the same theory in learning as is applied to society by Banks (1997: 1) who asserts that:

A fundamental premise of a democratic society is that citizens will participate in the governing of the nation . . . People are not born democrats. Consequently, an important goal of the schools in a democratic society is to help students acquire the knowledge, values, and skills needed to participate effectively in public communities.

For the purpose of this discussion, it is necessary to provide a reminder of the crucial skills which have been identified as essential to the learner if s/he is to ‘fulfil her/his learning and life potential’ as outlined by the NCCA (undated *b*) (see Section 2.8). The crucial skills are noted to be: ‘critical and creative thinking, working with others, being personally effective and communicating’. Reaching one’s potential and personal effectiveness are both dependent on self-awareness. Self-awareness and self-reflection,

which have been shown by this research to increase significantly during the P&SA study, are lynchpins to acquiring these crucial skills and to realising self-actualisation (Maslow, 1954).

The import of these findings is supported by Atkins (2000: 32) who suggests ‘self awareness is the foundation skill upon which reflective practice is built’, linking both to professional development and lifelong learning. Also supporting the evidence presented here for the benefits of P&SA in the relational aspect of learning, Atkins underlines the enhancement of learning in this area, pointing out that it results in a better appreciation of own principles, conduct and attitudes. In a further support to the findings of this research, Atkins goes on to link the self-awareness to self-direction and responsibility of lifelong learners. These findings of increases in self-awareness and reflection can also be linked to the findings of enhanced judgement, empathy and evaluation skills, the combination of which supports the development of *conscious thinking* (see Section 2.7). This is clarified by, Mezirow (1991: 106) who points out:

reflection is more than simple awareness of our experiencing or of being aware of our awareness; process reflection involves both reflection and critique of how we are perceiving, thinking, judging, feeling, and acting and premise reflection involves awareness and critique of the reasons why we have done so.

In further support of this line of reasoning, Freire (1970: 28) infers a correlation between reflection and self-direction when he intimates that ‘only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves’. It is reasonable to assume that reflective practice, embedded in self-awareness, supports effective personal and professional development.

### 7.3.1 LIFESPAN EDUCATION

The evidence presented in this research indicates that the employment of P&SA provides a clear enhancement of motivation, interaction and co-operation, empathy, communication, objective judgement and reflection: this reflection is focused not only on the self, but on peers within the group and on the *process* of working on a group-based activity.

That the findings of enhanced skills of judgement, and hence decision-making are significant is highlighted by Boud and Falchikov (2006), who appeal for learners to be prepared for lifelong learning by arming them with these skills, which they view as a necessity. In life, as in conducting P&SA, learners need to develop the capacity to judge their own work and the work of others and to be able to make decisions ‘in the uncertain and unpredictable circumstances in which they will find themselves in the future’ (p 402). These skills, which are developed in P&SA in order to evaluate, review and provide feedback, are transferable skills, which are required by all professionals (Raban and Litchfield, 2009).

These skills also underpin all learning needed across a lifespan. They are close correlates of the skills of ‘decision-making, problem-solving, empathy and tolerance for others, critical judgement, thinking, vision and planning’ described by Longworth and Davies (1996: 50) as essential life and social skills. In recommending these skills for lifelong learning, they point out that these skills are ignored because they ‘relate to a set of educational and social ideals which tend to be unfashionable in today’s utilitarian and unimaginative world’ (p50). They suggest the root of the failure to take life and social skills seriously lies in the fact that they are not assessed, a situation which is naturally redressed by the continuous employment of P&SA. They further suggest that if these

skills are acquired they will help the learner to understand more and to develop a more open-minded attitude.

The finding in this research that such a learning methodology as P&SA should be started in early childhood education approaches an overall consensus. This was seen as an ongoing reflective self-dialogue in participants, with the arguments that come to the fore being the need to begin this form of assessment early to permit the learner both the full advantage of immersion in that environment, allowing benefits, which build on their own foundation, to fully accrue and amplify future benefits. The pay forward returns include the feeling of enhanced control of one's own destiny, critical thinking and evaluation skills, responsibility for own learning and the overall enhanced life-skills. This echoes the sentiments of Longworth and Davies (1996) who believe that these skills are needed to be developed in children. The evidence from this research does show clearly that the learners engaged, co-operated and interacted more freely with each other and were encouraged to become more self-directed through the process of P&SA. This analysis, which demands early introduction of P&SA (or other innovative learning or assessment forms), is supported by the literature, with Gardner's (1993b) argument that the nature of a child's early experience can act to enhance or hinder the development of creative capital. The enhancement of such development depends on the child experiencing a relaxed, secure environment, conducive to exploration and discovery of all that surrounds that life vision. This experience may be denied, or the child may be 'pushed in only one direction or burdened with the view that there is only one correct answer or that correct answers must be meted out only by those in authority' (p 31): this leads to a decreased prospect for thinking and acting creatively as an adult. Further support for the early introduction of P&SA is provided by Humphreys' (1993: 36) claim that 'authoritarianism fosters passivity' and his assertion that this can

be addressed if children are educated to adopt a proactive approach rather than having the direction pointed out for them by others.

The practice of P&SA is shown by this investigation to enhance such skills as judgement, confidence and self-direction, all of which are necessary components of critical thinking. In the more traditional learning environment it may not be that simple for the young learner to acquire these skills, if, as suggested by Cottrell (2005: 11), learners spend all of their time rote learning the words of the teacher; she supports the need for learners to develop critical thinking skills because ‘critical analysis is a typical and expected activity’, which allows students to ‘question and challenge’. Although her arguments are aimed at higher education, they are just as relevant to elementary education: maybe more so at this stage, as learners are developing their habits of learning, thinking and behaving, which will dictate their (and our) future life and learning. The argument that childhood is an important time, as these early years are when children are learning the social norms and rules of society, is supported by (Thomas, 1998: 144): she calls on education to factor in ‘personal development’ into the child’s learning to avoid sole concentration on ‘academic and intellectual abilities’. The rationale for the emphasis on early introduction of P&SA (or any learner-centric methodology) is elucidated by Dewey (1916: 4) who explains:

The young of human beings compare so poorly in original efficiency with the young of many of the lower animals, that even the powers needed for physical sustentation have to be acquired under tuition. How much more, then, is the case with respect to all the technological, artistic, scientific, and moral achievements of humanity!

This is a sobering thought because the quality of the child’s learning not only shapes this generation but future generations to come.

### 7.3.2 *RIGHT FROM WRONG*

There is also evidence to suggest that issues in relation to ethics may be an easier task to address in childhood than in adulthood. For example, Feldman (2008: 15) describes Freud's proposal of the development of conscience, the 'superego', from about age five or six, which is learned from parents and others surrounding the child to allow the distinction of right from wrong. P&SA, applied at primary education can help harness and incorporate this formative sense of right from wrong, forming a more robust *character* and sense of integrity into adulthood, and making for a more fair assessment climate. That ethical behaviour has its origins in childhood is also referred to by Dewey (1916: 18) who points out 'manners are but minor morals. Moreover, in major morals, conscious instruction is likely to be efficacious only in the degree in which it falls in with the general "walk and conversation" of those who constitute the child's social environment'.

### 7.3.3 *HOLISTIC PRACTICE*

The findings of this research show that P&SA foster the development of skills which extend into the affective domain, such as the observed increase in empathy, co-operation and reflection. This provides support for development of non-traditional, non-academic skills together with academic learning, allowing P&SA to be classified as a holistic learning methodology. The desirability of this outlook is supported by the literature, which shows a growing demand for a more holistic philosophy of learning. That is a philosophy in which the learning environment caters for the *whole* person, including personal and social development as well as academic advancement of the learner. This draws both the right and left hemispheres of the brain into the learning equation, providing a greater fusion of creative and analytical abilities, providing a more balanced development (Edwards, 1979). Rogers (1983: 20) adds support for



bilateral ‘whole-person learning’, claiming ‘significant learning combines the logical *and* the intuitive, the intellect *and* the feelings, the concept *and* the experience, the idea *and* the meaning. When we learn in that way, we are *whole*’.

The life and social skills advantage afforded by P&SA are supplemented by increases in feelings of responsibility and self-direction reported by learners. The capacity to accept responsibility and to self-direct, aids the capacity to adapt to a changing environment. It was observed during the investigation that P&SA called for maturity and students welcome and want this responsibility, and fulfilment of this want adds to student motivation. This responsibility also adds to the sense of self-direction, which, together with skills of critical thinking, underpins lifelong learning. As described above, while all stages of learning are important, it is the early learning experience that has the power to cast a shadow over or illuminate the learner’s future learning. This linkage of critical thinking skills is in line with a constructivist (Bruner, 1996) perspective, which is the preferred approach of the Department of Education and Science, outlined below, as best practice for both school and adult learning. Sternberg (2008: 150) attributes ‘the whole thinking-skills movement’ to the work of John Dewey.

To accommodate lifelong learning (including early), the Department of Education and Science (2000: 30, 31) outlines the following characteristics:

- an holistic curriculum, focused on a broad sphere of learning and on catering for the learner’s educational and personal needs in a way which reflects her/his cultural and community context and experience;

- a view of the student as a self-directed, self-motivated learner;

- a recognition of the student as the centre of the learning process, being supported by teachers and other learners rather than as one in pursuit of the learning which others have already acquired – i.e. learning as *construction* rather than as *instruction*. Participative models for identifying and adapting provision to learner needs are central to this process;

a core learning objective of preparing the learner for a life of learning rather than for a terminal, end-of-learning examination;

new models of assessment and greater fluidity between the educational sectors themselves and between these and other domains particularly of work and home . . .

The evidence collected in this research clearly shows that these concepts are integral to, and are perceived by participants to be integral to, the practice of P&SA. The Department of Education and Science (2000) stresses the importance of early education and emphasises the necessity to strive for self-reliance in learners from a young age.

#### 7.3.4 *PARTNERSHIP*

The role of supporting the learner in the development of these skills, abilities and knowledge falls to the teacher, who has most contact with the learner. It is the teacher's responsibility to support the learner, ensuring the teacher-learner relationship is nurtured. This calls for stepping away from teacher-led assessment, which runs counter to several of the aforementioned principles, and embracing a learner-teacher partnership approach.

Self-direction in learning is diametrically opposed to teacher-directed learning. There is ample evidence from this research to indicate that the learner-teacher partnership approach is both practical and feasible. It is seen to bring with it the discussed benefits of self-direction and learner responsibility, linked to enhanced learner engagement, motivation, productivity and quality of output. Teacher-directed assessment runs counter to self-directed learning because it impedes the learner's motivation, places responsibility firmly with the teacher, hence inhibiting learner proactivity. Thus, it cements a *teacher-in-charge* mentality, which can ultimately lead to a loss of sense of *self*, leaving the student in danger of jeopardising not only immediate progress but future outcomes. This can lead to the phenomenon described by Seligman (1975) as

‘learned helplessness’. For example, Boud (1995: 4), a prolific writer and proponent of P&SA, underscores how teacher-centred assessment can result in this phenomenon as he recalls

. . . being told in primary school that I couldn’t write and had nothing to say; a remark which for many years was self-fulfilling and probably led to me failing ‘O’ level English Language twice.

He shows this conviction, maintaining, ‘assessment . . . needs to be seen as an indispensable accompaniment to lifelong learning. This means that it has to move from the exclusive domain of assessors into the hands of learners’ (Boud, 2000: 151). Stefani (1998: 339) supports this with her focused concern that teacher led assessment is ‘pedagogically unsound’, and reinforces the import to students of ‘developing the capacity for self-assessment and evaluation’.

Partnering the teacher in P&SA helps to redress the incongruity which currently exists between teaching students to become self-directed by, incongruously, expecting them to follow teacher-led instruction in learning and assessment. This is the paradox discussed in Chapter 1. It has been shown in this research that this type of P&SA forms a scaffold for learners. With the support of this scaffold, which is provided by the teacher and peers, learners can safely practice self-direction and responsibility for their learning, thus righting the current paradox which exists in education. It also removes barriers between learner and teacher, allowing for greater parity of esteem. This creates a more just, equitable and inclusive learning environment.

### 7.3.5 *CHALLENGES*

Notwithstanding that the findings endorse P&SA and a teacher-learner partnership, there are challenges which need contending with if this form of assessment is to be

accepted as a positive assessment and learning resource. These challenges present in two general forms. The first of these are in the form of logistical considerations, which include teacher overload, necessary curriculum and timetable restructuring and defining standards for summative assessment. The second, facilitation needs, also present challenges which include: clarification of ethical underpinnings, need to build trust and confidence and difficulty in objective assessment.

Some participants provide suggestions of ways to meet these challenges, and these are put forward under recommendations (see Section 8.2).

There is no doubt that these issues are real and can be a source of stress during the process of P&SA and are in need of attention. Similar findings have already been previously described in the literature (see Chapter 2), which are encapsulated well by Falchikov, (1998:10) who points out that:

anyone who has involved their students in assessment will know that self- and peer-assessment is hard work. Students are being asked to spend time and energy on the exercise, and staff are required to ensure the organisation and smooth running of the scheme.

Although there are different aspects of concern presented in the findings, they share one common dominator, which is that addressing them requires resources. In particular, as already stated there is a heavy draw on time. This is needed, as with any learning methodology, for preparation, delivery and monitoring of both learning and assessment aspects. There is also an additional demand on time, which is common to the introduction of any new methodology, by the various aspects of:

- teacher familiarisation
- learner induction into the programme

- training, including practice runs
- scaffold of support and guidance
- continuous explanation, clarification and monitoring

This demand on resources and time can be ameliorated in part by the use of technology to aid in the assessment itself, and in the practice and training aspects of the assessment. For example, Wood (2009) describes the use of an online instrument for use in both the assessment of own and peers work and as a framework to assist in the training in developing evaluative judgement skills. The draw on resources is also further evidenced by the literature. In particular, the need for training in the assessment is emphasised by Brown *et al* (1997) and Sutherland (2005) which is further focused on the need for trials to build learner experience by Sivan (2000) and class discussion added to the training by Isaacs (2002). The overall demand on time involves both learners and teachers according to Ballantyne *et al* (2002) while the need for support and guidance to sustain students throughout the introduction was noted by Brown *et al* (1998) and McDowell and Sambell (1999).

### 7.3.6 *CHANGE IN CULTURE*

The concerns around friendship bias and difficulty with the P&SA process are evidenced as substantial and can be a source of conflict. However, if conflict were to arise, this type of assessment was observed to have the capacity to aid in the resolution. There is much in the literature about friendship influence, and discomfiture in marking or being marked by self or peers to suggest these are perceived as recurrent sources of tension. It is worthy of note that Magin (2001) studied reciprocal marking arrangements in a case study of tertiary students employing P&SA, and found the friendship bias effect negligible. He acknowledged that one case study does not prove

conclusively that there is no friendship bias, but it does demonstrate that P&SA can be bias free. He concludes that where bias does occur, it is because ‘commitment, understanding or trust by students engaged in rating their peers’ (p 62) has become dysfunctional. From the suggestions the students have made in the findings (see Section 6.3) there is clear evidence to suggest that there is a lack of understanding and full appreciation of the concept and benefits of P&SA. This needs to be addressed to preclude such bias. Some suggestions drawn from the findings are incorporated in the recommendations.

While encouragement, support, guidance, training, practice and experience can help, it is likely that it will take some time to manage this situation and assuage fears effectively. Firstly, it is reasonable to assume that there will be a certain natural resistance to change and secondly, the longer students have been engaged in the *habit* of following the teacher in assessment the more likely they will be to wonder at taking a lead and partnering teacher and peers in assessment. Further strain on this situation is referred to by Baldwin (2000: 458) who describes it as ‘the culture of individual learning that students are used to. They expect to learn alone and probably to compete against colleagues. This constructs a culture of resistance to co-operative learning’. The impact of this acculturation is further evidenced by Race *et al* (2005: 131) who look at the effect of assessment on the learner and suggest that by the time the walls of higher education have been scaled, students are ‘hard wired’ to react to the stimulus of impending assessment. They observe that ‘nothing affects students more than assessment yet they often claim that they are in the dark as to what goes on in the minds of their assessors, and examiners’. There is no doubt from evidence in the literature and this research, that students are primed to favour the conventional teacher-led assessment because that is the accepted norm. From the teacher’s viewpoint, Boud *et al* (1999: 417) add a challenging perspective, suggesting the deeper concern that

‘assessment is the principal mechanism whereby staff exercise power and control over students’.

These elements together conspire to allow a natural defiance of the transition from traditional to new assessment from both teachers and learners, and this struggle can hinder progress with P&SA. Unwittingly, a process which should serve the learner as a learning tool and a monitor to aid personal progress can thwart that progress. A growing number of educationalists appear dissatisfied with traditional assessment and view it as a deepening source of tension between the learner and teacher and in urgent need of an overhaul. It can be deduced that more innovative forms of assessment, embedded in a learner-teacher partnership approach, are called for. P&SA have been shown by this investigation to satisfy these criteria, which is in line with the findings of (Brown *et al*, 1998; Cheng and Warren, 2000; McDonald and Boud, 2003; Boud and Falchikov, 2006; and Crisp *et al*, 2006).

As the evidence suggests that advantages of P&SA outweigh the disadvantages, it will need a proactive approach to tackling these and all concerns until the *habit* of undermining self is remedied, but it must be done if students are to take a positive role, becoming agents of change in society.

A fair deduction to make is that the earlier P&SA are implemented, the earlier the *habit* of depending on the *self* could be inculcated, preferably from the beginning of the lifelong learning journey. This is predicated on implementing assessment according to best practice, which places responsibility for learning and progress with the learners, ensuring a self-directed and self-reliant attitude.

#### The Teenage Learner

The evidence from the literature and from this research study points to learners' vulnerability during their teenage years. It has been pinpointed that students are particularly prone to peer-pressure and other forms of psychological distress at this time, which can be exacerbated by traditional examination stress (discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.5. and 2.7). Findings in this study also revealed that this age group can be overly critical of self. It is clear that P&SA are in a position, at some level, to help assuage this vulnerability because it promotes the development of reflection, critical thinking, objectivity and skill in evaluation. These skills cultivate awareness of self and others and, with practice, promote *conscious thinking*, honing one's skill in discernment.

This research has demonstrated that P&SA can be applied in education from childhood (nine to ten years), a stage which has been identified as less prone to peer pressure and more amenable to family influence (Hayes and Kernan, 2001). Furthermore it has also been shown by McSharry (2009), who studied body image, that peer-pressure is a greater influence on teenagers than family or even media impact. (See Chapter 2, Sections 2.5 and 2.6). In relation to learning, Fawcett (2005), studying second year tertiary level students, found that peer approval holds more sway than teacher approval. Thus, it is reasonable to deduce that, if students are introduced to P&SA, which provides practice in building a repertoire of the aforementioned skills from an early age, they will acquire the *habit* of reasoned discernment. This discernment, informed by peer and teacher feedback, provides a balanced perspective, which in a social setting with peers, means that the peer pressure has a positive reinforcing character, helping to counter any ill-substantiated or dependency-based beliefs or attitudes.



### The Senior Learner

Despite the espoused value of lifelong learning, the introduction of assessment at this level of education exposed certain vulnerability. It would appear that learning for life does not automatically equate with having a *value* placed on the learning outcomes for life. This was reflected in the findings by learners and co-ordinators who voiced some trepidation at the prospect of introducing assessment at this level, where students had been absent from learning and assessment, in a classroom context, for a long time. This was due to initial negative connotations attached to traditional assessment. This research shows that P&SA was observed to be a natural form of assessment suitable for the lifelong learner, which helped dispel these initial fears, albeit with two small populations of learners. It is reasonable to assume that with regular experience of P&SA, such negative connotations which attach to assessment would dissipate. While there was no desire among the learners to be graded or ranked, there was an expressed desire to have their learning evaluated. This is a reasonable expectation because all learners need to know that not only is there value in learning, but that *their learning* is valued sufficiently to warrant evaluation. This helps to provide an indication to the senior learner (as to all learners) that society places a value on the learning and by association on the learner. P&SA were shown to accommodate and fulfil these obligations to the learner, demonstrating the capacity to sustain lifelong assessment and learning.

## 8 RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

*There is no limit to our understanding or sense of fulfilment, no limit to our knowledge or experience of any idea, thing, or person. We need only to come to life again regarding some puzzlement and everything crystallizes in and through and beyond it. The whole process of being within something, being within ourselves, being within others, and correlating these outer and inner experiences and meanings is infinite, endless, eternal. This is the beauty of knowledge and discovery. It keeps us forever awake, alive, and connected with what is and what matters in life.*

Moustakas, 1994:65

### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the recommendations which have evolved from the research study. Overall, the recommendations are an attempt to reflect a future which underpins a democratic philosophy of education and an endeavour to sustain and support the learner in realising and enjoying her/his potential in the service of self and the wider society. They contain aspects aimed at a macro and a micro level. The latter, offered by the participants following their immediate experience, are necessary to inform best practice. Following the recommendations, the chapter brings the work to a close with the final conclusions.

### 8.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Implement P&SA in primary education, in order to improve the prospect of
  - a. its up-take
  - b. ingraining the practice of assessing self and peers in learners
  - c. developing future assessment and social innovators

- d. helping to break the cycle of dependency on *authority*, moving away from *learned helplessness* towards self-reliance and ownership of own learning and assessment
  - e. building on the naturally developing sense of right from wrong
- 2. Adopt a policy of the promotion of this practice of assessment, within a group-based learning context, preferably embedded in a holistic educational curriculum, which recognises and balances both the affective and cognitive domains of learning. This policy will enshrine student-teacher partnership with parity of esteem, especially around the design and implementation of this assessment practice. The policy should include a requirement for intensive induction into P&SA for new teachers, regular updating of skills for existing teachers and monitoring of and further research and development in P&SA.
- 3. Conduct longitudinal studies tracking cohorts of students from primary education onward to confirm the maintenance of long-term benefits of this practice of assessment
- 4. Urgently initiate in-service training in P&SA for teachers in primary education. As there are few experienced P&SA facilitators, this may only be carried out in a graduated manner as facilitators become available.
- 5. Phase P&SA in as part of the primary education curriculum as best practice in assessment to sustain the learner across the spectrum of lifelong learning. This must be carried out in an age appropriate manner with age appropriate materials and will be phased in as teachers, trained as P&SA facilitators, come on stream.

6. Incorporate P&SA into all initial teacher training institutions in their curricula, as (a) a holistic assessment for trainee teachers and as (b) an educational subject. By including this form of assessment as both part of initial teacher training and as a specific subject this will ensure:
  - the building of knowledge of theoretical underpinnings
  - gaining practical familiarisation, which will build:
    - ▶ competence
    - ▶ experience, sufficient to comfortably embrace the concept of P&SA
    - ▶ a positive outlook with which to project P&SA
  - developing the capacity to implement the assessment with first-hand understanding from the perspective of both a learner and a facilitator
7. Implement P&SA as a sustainable best practice assessment in the curriculum across the spectrum of lifelong learning, to include secondary level schools in mainstream education, further education and training, both full and part-time students, including early school leavers and senior learners (see item 8 below) and students in higher education.
8. Instigate research to determine what, and to what extent are the correlating factors between P&SA and peer-pressure. This study should include both the immediate and the longer term effects, to determine the efficacy of P&SA initiated at different ages (see Section 7.3.5).
9. Adopt a proactive approach to the incorporation of formative P&SA in senior learner learning programmes, with the necessary support scaffold.

10. Develop a set of reliable supports for learners undergoing their initial episode of P&SA. This set could comprise, for example, the following recommendations, offered by the research participants, as well as having been recorded in own observations:

- a. train learners in evaluation, using, for example, role play
- b. provide encouragement;
- c. allow plenty of time so student anxieties can be acknowledged, explored and assuaged;
- d. ensure sufficient time is factored in to accommodate exploration of the benefits of P&SA with students;
- e. provide trial material and documentation (age or level appropriate language), allowing time for discussion and question and answer sessions;
- f. include trial runs free from formal assessment, followed up by feedback sessions, to promote confidence in self and in P&SA;
- g. provide sufficient space and time to allow individual completion of assessment forms anonymously, at own pace and in private, away from the *classroom* context

(Other participant suggestions are contained in Chapters 5 and 6).

### **8.3 FINAL CONCLUSION**

This dissertation has documented a two-phase study which resulted from an attempt to replace the traditional form of assessment with a standardised form of P&SA, designed to encourage learner input and a learner-teacher partnership approach to assessment.

The aim of the study in Phase One was to determine *whether P&SA can improve student motivation within a group-based context*, which was demonstrated to be the case and has been confirmed by the continued reporting throughout Phase Two. This confirmation comes directly from the reporting of increases in learner engagement, depth of learning and both the quality and quantity of work produced. It may also be indirectly confirmed by inference from the reports of increased co-operation, student confidence and signs of increased maturity, denoted by the taking of responsibility and direction for own learning.

The research aim of Phase Two was twofold. Firstly, it sought to establish *to what extent P&SA could, within a group-based learning context, sustain all lifelong learners*. There is clear evidence that P&SA can serve all learners throughout their lifelong learning. It has been established that, with the requisite scaffolding and appropriate safeguards, this assessment style serves as both an effective teaching and learning methodology and assessment instrument. Moreover, as a learning methodology, P&SA is naturally more learner centric than traditional learning methodologies, based as it is on a holistic philosophy. This assessment style cultivates the acquisition, through experiential learning, of life and relational skills which can be neglected in focusing on academic outcomes.

Secondly, the investigation sought to determine, *within the same context, whether P&SA can increase learner motivation, engender self-efficacy, and facilitate a sense of self-direction*. As in Phase One, the evidence to support a positive effect on student motivation is robust. Bolstering of students' self-efficacy may be inferred from the reports of increased self-confidence, self-awareness and self-esteem. The self-confidence provides increased belief in self; the self-awareness (reflected in reflection on the *self*, and reflection on others to properly situate the self-reflection) demonstrates

increased awareness of one's capabilities; and self-esteem shows the general level of feelings about the *self*. Together these concepts constitute a healthier, increasing self-efficacy and this evidence is shored up by the reported development of critical and objective self-evaluation skills, which is in line with Watkins' (1999) learning about learning (see Sustainable Assessment, Section 2.4). Increases in self-direction are evidenced directly by the participants and indirectly through the references to a greater willingness to accept responsibility for own learning.

The body of evidence indicates that the answers to the overall research questions are resoundingly positive.

This work provides evidence to show that it is possible, through P&SA, to take a step away from the over-trodden path of traditional assessment, which inadvertently cultivates an over-reliance on *authority*. It shows that the practice of assessing self and peers can support higher order thinking, paving the way to a more self-sustaining and self-directed route. This provides for greater capacity and *confidence-in self* to stand alone (Fromm 1942) and to take responsibility for future learning, progress and direction. It also shows that a partnership approach to assessment is a more equitable form of education. The partnership approach gives an indication that the multilateral manifold skills, embedded in the teacher-learner and learner-learner partnerships, can provide an interdependent approach: best serving the self and ultimately the greater communal good.

The work also pinpoints two particular areas of vulnerability, demanding of attention, which P&SA can help redress:

- 1) *Lifelong learning* necessitates *lifelong assessment* of learning. The *value* of the learning needs continuous appraisal at *all* levels throughout the learner's

education. This is needed to ensure the *value of the person* who has undertaken the learning is acknowledged throughout her/his life span.

- 2) Peer pressure has been shown to be notably prevalent during second-level education (see Chapter 2). P&SA can help temper this situation. Assessing self and peers develops the *affect* as well as *cognition*, developing the *whole* person. In addition, P&SA also provide a set of skills, including critical and analytical thought, supporting the development of emotional and social maturity, alongside academic accomplishment.

P&SA and the ensuing transferable attitudes and skills it engenders are relevant to sustainable development in a global knowledge economy because they build capacity (social capital), both individually and collectively, through developing independence of thought while at the same time encouraging an empathic interdependence through the collaborative nature of the interactive feedback and assessment process.

The findings from the learners, teachers and co-ordinator provides evidence that P&SA, a student-teacher partnership approach, is capable of supporting learning at all ages. It can sustain learning, from the senior learner to the young primary school child, whether in a classroom or in a community based learning environment. It gives learners at all educational levels a necessary voice, and an outlet for using that voice unbroken throughout their lifelong learning. This is a reconstruction of boundaries as learners take more control of their assessment and learning. The concentration is on *self* (learner) *learning* control and self-direction through the practice of assessing self and peers: this will impact on self, group and culture.

Furthermore, student participation in this assessment practice process follows a democratic philosophy. It demonstrates respect for the individual, encourages



participation, supports availability of information and demands mutual responsibility, from planning to evaluation – the cornerstones of a democratic philosophy of education described by Knowles (1990).

Finally, P&SA, as examined in this study are at least as capable of rigorous assessment as traditional methods with the additional benefit of being an effective social learning tool. Its reach is far greater than the classroom, as it conceals the potential to help address social and life issues as diverse as stereotyping and peer-pressure because from a young age, through setting criteria, assessing self and others work and providing and receiving feedback, the learner is learning to think independently. S/he is learning the ability to judge, whilst being non-judgmental of the person, focusing on the aim of the assessment. This generates the ability to discriminate. From a young age, the learner learns to judge, to make decisions, to think critically, to take responsibility and to be accountable, which are essential ingredients of self-direction. The *habit* of looking for someone who is in charge to lead the way is arrested as the learner comes to understand that the way forward does not lie without, but resides within.

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